掟上今日子の遺言書

西尾維新

NISIOISIN




掟上今日子の遺言書
西尾維新
NISIOISIN
講談社

The Testament of Okitegami Kyouko

西尾維新
NISIOISIN

Kodansha

Illustrations: VOFAN

Formatting: Veia

Chapter 1: Kakushidate Yakusuke Being Hospitalized

Chapter 2: Kakushidate Yakusuke Commissioning

Chapter 3: Kakushidate Yakusuke Guiding

Chapter 4: Kakushidate Yakusuke Listening

Chapter 5: Kakushidate Yakusuke Waiting

Chapter 6: Kakushidate Yakusuke Confronting

Chapter 7: Kakushidate Yakusuke Revisiting

Chapter 8: Kakushidate Yakusuke Questioning

Chapter 9: Kakushidate Yakusuke Writing

Chapter 1: Kakushidate Yakusuke Being Hospitalized

Chapter 2: Kakushidate Yakusuke Commissioning

Chapter 3: Kakushidate Yakusuke Guiding

Chapter 4: Kakushidate Yakusuke Listening

Chapter 5: Kakushidate Yakusuke Waiting

Chapter 6: Kakushidate Yakusuke Confronting

Chapter 7: Kakushidate Yakusuke Revisiting

Chapter 8: Kakushidate Yakusuke Questioning

Chapter 9: Kakushidate Yakusuke Writing

Chapter 1:

Kakushidate Yakusuke Being Hospitalized

1

Crunch! came a sound much like the crushing of an egg.

Its source: my body.

Oblivious to what had happened, utterly confused about how— such words were too flowery for the situation. Before the thought 'utterly confused' even had a chance to register, my consciousness faded. All I could glean was: so this is how it feels to die.

2

Well, if we could die whenever we wanted, life wouldn't be much of a struggle, and while life is fleeting, it is also stubborn to the core.

After hovering at death's door for a full week, I awoke in a hospital bed, learning that a middle school girl had fallen from the roof of a building, her body crashing down directly onto me as I walked home.

Somehow or other, it seems I'd cheated death.

If I was expected to savor this miracle however, to humbly thank the heavens for this misfortune that had fallen upon me quite literally— was a bit much. It made me want to curse the heavens and ask what grudge they held against me.

Simply in the sphere of my everyday life, I consistently and constantly am embroiled in all sorts of crimes, from the smallest to the most

heinous.

Each and every time suffering wrong accusations, continually treated like a suspect, shouldering blame to the extent that it feels like a backpack.

After a long while, finally— for the first time in forever— I found a job.

Why on earth did this have to happen as soon as I found a job.

To lay out the extent of the damage: I did survive, but my right arm and thigh were severely fractured, so it goes without saying that I can't work for the time being— forget work, I couldn't even write or eat— needless to say, the job was done for.

Using the opportunity of drafting resumes to also start writing something like memoirs, given my present crippled state, I felt I might have to become a writer for real.

Hearing my words, Kondou-san who came to visit gave me a stern talking to.

"Might have to become a writer? Oh, Yakusuke, you don't know how hard it is to be a writer!"

Kondou-san served at a major publishing company, Sakusousha, where in his early thirties he already held the position of the head of the Comics Weekly magazine department. Perhaps because of his previous stint in the novels department, he wasn't tolerant of careless remarks like those I had just made.

Before I could apologize for my blunder, Kondou-san chucked and said,

"Young people who underestimate writers are the ones who, unexpectedly, easily become writers—you've got real potential there. You could easily spin your everyday experiences into any number of

books. This experience is indeed precious."

Was he mocking me? Or encouraging me? Both seemed possible, yet neither quite right. I figured I should take his words positively.

"And you know,"

Kondou-san went on, slicing a great deal of apple by the bed. It pained me to have my former boss do such a thing but, as an injured patient with

a disabled right hand, all I could do was accept his kindness. Moreover, he would dislike it the most if I were to show such reserve —we are just friends now, and he wouldn't even allow me to use polite language.

"In the world of manga, a girl falling from the sky is quite a coveted event.

But when it actually happens, it turns out to be such a tragedy... You've had your fair share of miserable experiences, but isn't being hospitalized quite rare for you?"

"Yeah, well, that's true. It's precious."

Considering what it was like, it would seem I got away with minor injuries, and according to the attending physician, as long as I remain conscious there would be no threat to my life. The broken bones, they weren't likely to cause any lasting damage either. The doctor assured me firmly that I could be discharged today if I was up to it—perhaps a polite way to hint that the hospital was running short of single rooms.

"Don't think like that, no need to stay any longer than necessary, not with hospital bills being what they are. My goodness, gotta thank your parents for that sturdy body of yours."

"I guess so. I'm filled with such gratitude I could cry..."

I never hesitated to tell people about the inconveniences of my tall stature, surpassing one hundred and ninety centimeters (and I believe it to be the very reason for my constantly attracting unwarranted attention and suspicion). But if it was thanks to my height that my life was saved this one time, I could only call it a blessing in disguise.

"They say broken bones mend stronger once they heal. Not that I need to be any stronger."

"Ha-ha, that's just folk wisdom, though."

Folk wisdom, is it?

"it's not muscle after all; can't magic itself back to health," he added on.

As expected of Kondou-san, so learned and well read.

Speaking of, I seem to recall some Greek philosopher or other who supposedly died when a tortoise shell fell on him and cracked his skull.

Although meeting the body of a fallen middle school girl could be said to be no less misfortunate, at least it didn't become the cause of my death.

Maybe my luck was not as bad as it could be.

What's more, I wasn't the only one saved.

The fallen middle schooler also managed to escape death by a hair's breadth, thanks to my chance presence below to break her fall. She fell from the seventh floor of a mixed residential and commercial high-rise—

under normal circumstances she should have been dead by now. It was because she had me as a cushion that she wasn't.

A middle schooler—to be precise, a first year in middle school.

A girl not yet twelve years old— at the most she could be called a child, not even an adolescent.

This too was why she was saved.

Had my hulking physique been a size smaller, or she been a grade higher, neither of us might have come out of it unscathed.

That being said, while I had regained consciousness, she was still hovering at death's door in another hospital. It's hard to say we were both

"unscathed". Still hospitalized, though I had heard talk that she had yet to regain consciousness, I couldn't know what state she was in. But one thing can be assumed: it wasn't a state that would allow me to smugly proclaim,

"It was only thanks to my self-sacrifice that her life was saved."

…Not to mention that even if the treatment worked and she woke up fine, she may not thank me at all—because.

Because she'd jumped off that building of her own free will.

Yes—a suicide jump.

With a will and shoes neatly arranged.

With no hope of rescue, she'd aimed for the asphalt road.

So for her, someone like me walking beneath her was just an unwanted interference with her resolve—a nuisance. Hence, despite my good intentions, I got no gratitude in return.

Call me shallow if you will, but since I was heavily injured because of this and will almost certainly be fired, I was hoping I could at least be a hero for saving a child's life—when actually, I just served as a thing to break her fall in her attempt.

Well, if you consider what suffering must have led the twelve year old girl to decide to take her own life, maybe it's not something to say "just" about, and compared to witnessing her crashing to the ground a few seconds earlier, things could have turned out worse.

She may not thank me, she may blame me, and maybe I should be proud to have saved a life all the same—even if it was the result of a mere accident.

Even if it's the result of bad luck, that's how it is.

"Hahaha, you're such a nice guy."

Kondou-san was really mocking me now.

"I wonder why someone like you is always accused as a criminal. Couldn't get off even this time, could you."

"....."

To hear it depressed me very much.

Misfortune being already a daily occurrence, I could never not feel depressed when wrongly accused— this time, though, was depressing to an exceptional degree.

Simply walking down the street, someone fell from above and crushed me, landing me in hospital with major injuries....However, since both of our lives were saved by that incident, depending on how you look at it, it could

be considered not a heroic tale, but at least a miraculous survival case, a positive thing.

But people saw nothing of the sort.

While I was unconscious all the TV broadcasts had apparently made it appear as if I had positioned myself under the fallen girl so as to deal her a final fatal blow.

What a final blow, she didn't even die— how do you have to twist and contort the facts to make it sound like that? In my haste I went through all the newspapers from the past week. The coverage was so outrageous I gave up halfway through reading.

In short, all the media pegged me as the culprit, accusing me of attempting to murder a middle schooler. Couldn't escape being implicated even with my life hanging by a thread— am I to carry this undeserved blame all the way to my grave? Truly an unprecedented, tailor-made misfortune just for me.

I considered my tendency to be falsely accused as having reached its peak.

I'd never fancied the thought of becoming a great detective, but it seemed I couldn't even be a victim. Perhaps because the "victim" was an underage schoolgirl, thankfully my name had not been plastered in the papers, which could maybe be counted as my solitary redemption.

But at this rate, it was only a matter of time until my real identity as

'secondhand bookstore clerk (25)' became public— not that it bothered me, but I felt terribly sorry for my boss who hired me.

"Secondhand bookstore clerk (25), eh? Who asked you to leave your job in publishing to work in a secondhand bookshop. That's what you

get for having a foot in two boats."

It left me speechless how sharply those at the forefront of publishing could speak.

But it did feel a bit like betraying my old boss.

I worked at the publishing company under Kondou-san for a time, and I was falsely accused and dismissed without a chance to defend myself. So I didn't really owe the company anything special.

But that's neither here nor there. To say my present state is some kind of divine retribution would be overstating things a bit, don't you think?

"I doubt it'll actually come to that, but… just in case the police believe the media stories and come knocking, I should probably have a detective at the ready..."

I muttered to myself, only half in jest.

I wasn't sure what sort of detective to call for a situation like this still...

My phone contacts had the business cards of several agencies, but I couldn't think of one offhand that specialized in dealing with falling girls.

If anything, I'd love an expert at handling media circuses... A professional in media control, that would be...

That's when Kondou-san said,

"How about Okitegami-san?"

"Oh...? Nah, this kind of case is not suitable for Kyouko-san. Not

Kyouko-san. Maybe it's the least suitable for her out of all the detectives out there."

Kyouko-san— Okitegami Kyouko. Calling her on was something I did in the past at Kondou-san's request; I'd introduced her to him as a detective.

Should I say she was an oddball of a detective? A somewhat peculiar one, anyway.

Hence, she was perfectly suited to handle the trouble Kondou-san had been facing at the time. However, her particularities made her clearly unfit for this case.

From my numerous experiences (generally one should not have this many), recovering a normal life after being put through a media circus requires a long battle of endurance. Precisely because of this, there's absolutely no chance here for the detective with the fastest case-cracking rate to swoop in and "solve any case in a day".

"I was just thinking, what a blessing in disguise it would be to take this opportunity to get closer to her, you know?”

"Hahaaha… very funny, Kondou-san. You know as well as I do there's no chance for progress with Kyouko-san."

"Not with that attitude.”

He shrugged his shoulders, and continued.

"Well, since you'll get someone else to restore your image..."

He handed me a peeled apple.

"Could you call Okitegami-san for me?"

"Huh? What do you…"

"That is, I..."

He said.

"I've got another case that I would like the forgetful detective—to forget."

3

Kondou-san was not only a friend but a benefactor of mine. I of course had no reason to refuse him.

During my past stint working at the publishing company I had found myself wrongly accused, and it was only Kondou-san who spoke up for me. For him I wouldn't think twice about going through hell and high water.

In fact, I'd go so far as to say that I, Kakushidate Yakusuke, had been perennially awaiting an opportunity to repay his kindness. Yet on this particular day, the abruptness of his request akin to a sudden blow left me stunned beyond measure.

Could Kondou-san have gotten into some trouble while I was hospitalized?

His predisposition to misfortune must be on par with mine. Most people wouldn't require a detective more than once or twice in their lifetime.

Especially not in such a short period.

"Listen here Yakusuke. To me it's not as sudden a request as it seems, nor am I trying to exploit your situation. The problem I'm facing and the predicament you've fallen into aren't entirely unrelated."

"Not entirely unrelated?"

"Not only, it's largely related to you…if I must be honest with myself, it's causing me a great deal of trouble. I imagine you're pretty troubled as well, and though I probably don't measure up to your level of trouble, it's still a considerable headache."

Speaking up to here, Kondou-san showed a weary smile— which I had missed as my thoughts were consumed with my own stuff, but now that I looked at him, I couldn't help seeing the exhaustion on his usually vibrant face.

What could've happened in the week I was unconscious? It was apparently largely related to me, but I didn't have the slightest clue. My obliviousness wasn't anything new, though.

"Something up with Satoi-sensei again?"

That Satoi-sensei was Satoi Aritsugu, one of the manga artists Kondou-san edited for, and also a wildly popular author for the magazine he was chief editor of.

The robbery at Satoi-sensei's studio that I had introduced Kyouko-san to was the last time we met. Satoi-sensei had left an impression on me as the temperamental genius type, so I figured she was was good at getting into trouble as she was at drawing.

But I was totally off base. I'd make a terrible detective.

"Satoi-sensei is doing great! Better than ever. The incident seems to have inspired her creatively. And Kyouko-san's personality was like

stimulation to her."

That's excellent news, though it made me feel anxious on a personal level.

I had wanted to write about Kyouko-san's detective adventures before someone as brilliant as Satoi-sensei put them to manga.

It seemed she wasn't one to draw mystery manga, thankfully...

"Then is it another mangaka?"

"You catch on fast, Yakusuke."

I was actually quite embarrassed by his praise.

I just didn't believe Kondou-san had any personal troubles, hence I figured if he needed a detective it had to be about his editorial work.

Nothing more ordinary or mundane than that, really.

"Well, it's not a manga artist I work with directly... I doubt you've heard of him yet. Fumoto-sensei. Fumoto Shun."

As you might guess, I hadn't heard of him.

However, "yet" was the word here. I surmised this must be an up and coming new manga artist likely to gain more fame and recognition going forward.

Different from Satoi-sensei, who already enjoyed an unshakable position and was in a league of her own, this man was a new talent the editorial department had high hopes for and attached great importance to—or something like that.

“Yeah, yeah, more or less. Only, he’s not exactly a newcomer. He’s actually older than Satoi-sensei and has been around longer."

"Really?”

The manga world gives the impression of young talent debuting one after another, but on the other hand there’s also a tendency for some to take surprisingly long to make their mark. That said, it's a job where one can dream of breaking through from anywhere at any time, but it's not all optimistic.

Sure it’s better than being unemployed, but it was a harsh world I didn’t think I could handle— at least not in the way Kondou-san put it, but maybe only those like Satoi-sensei who take hardship as nourishment are bound to succeed.

“Fumoto-sensei’s ‘Very Well,’ it started serializing in our magazine recently and… How to put it, it’s something I feel has potential. As editor-in-chief, I am filled with excitement from the bottom of my heart that his time is finally coming.”

Wow, Kondou-san’s job must be so fulfilling—he sounds so enthusiastic that I temporarily put my own affairs at the back of my mind to feel happiness for him. But not having read the manga, I couldn’t really comment.

Plus, from how he talks, he and Fumoto-sensei seemed to be sailing much as smoothly as Satoi-sensei, having no room for an unskilled person like me whose only talent is sidestepping trouble.

Just as I was puzzling about what this issue could possibly be,

“Just that, there’s been a problem these past few days, and it’s very serious."

He finally got to the point.

I leaned forward, wanting to listen closely.

Just what was this "trouble not entirely unrelated to me."

“I mean, nothing unprecedented…Fumoto-sensei’s issue isn’t the bizarre, unheard-of, extraordinary kind that’s befallen you almost daily. It’s a problem that manga artists or novelists, or any 'creator’ of some sort, could potentially face at any time. It’s neither especially novel or especially classic."

”…Kondou-san, you’re talking in circles and making this more complicated than it needs to be. Don’t worry, no matter what kind of request it is, if there’s a real necessity for it, Kyouko-san will accept, you can rest assured. She’s not the sort of detective who only takes on

'charming mysteries’ or 'baffling cases.’ Besides, as the forgetful detective, you know she keeps all secrets.“

As far as the forgetful detective goes, unless it was a "case that could be solved within a day,” she wouldn’t take it on either. After all, just recently she had made a right mess of things by not strictly adhering to this rule.

Though I felt bad for Kondou-san, if I already could discern that the case was an unnecessary hardship at my end, I’d recommend another detective more suited for it than Kyouko-san— I too felt partially responsible for that previous incident.

“No, that’s not what I meant… You’re right though, no point in beating around the bush and raising your unwarranted expectations, that would counter my intentions. Being an editor, some things are just hard to express.”

This hesitant manner was so unlike Kondou-san— not raising my expectations, but with his solemn preamble I couldn’t help imagining what kind of huge deal it could be.

However, just when I thought he had finally made up his mind to get down to business and start giving specifics, he jumped back to the previous topic.

“The fallen middle schooler…she was trying to commit suicide, wasn’t she?"

Though for some reason certain news reports (almost all of them) had morphed it into me trying to murder her, at the very least the fact she jumped off the building on her own was undisputed.

I, having personally experienced countless events straight out of a mystery novel, would be inclined to suspect that this entire affair was actually a

murder staged to look like a suicide. I’ve experienced such cases firsthand.

This is not purely hypothetical. But the girl left a handwritten suicide note, so there should be no mistake.

A note typed on a computer or sent via text message could potentially be forged, but handwritten.

"Yeah, the problem lies with what she wrote.”

"? So, what's the problem with it?"

As someone suspected of murder, the existence of the will was like a lifeline in my eyes. For now it’s just baseless speculation by the media, but without that will I could have really been charged with attempted murder— come to think of it, a suicide does not necessarily need to leave a note, so I really should be grateful to her for leaving one.

“Yeah. As a friend, I feel I should be just as grateful to her as you are —

but, I can't seem to feel thankful at all."

Kondou-san's tone carried a hint of anger. This anger probably wasn't directed at me, but I still shrank back instinctively.

"H-how so?"

"That will has become the root of my… and also Fumoto-sensei's troubles.

No, it has taken root, sprouted, and the vines growing from it are suffocating Fumoto-sensei so he can hardly breathe."

"……?"

"It's about what's written— she declared herself a fan of his."

Being as dense as I am, I was still left in the fog at this point. But the following words made it clear just how grave and heavy were the troubles they carried.

"She wrote in black and white that she was personally moved by Fumoto-sensei's piece to take her life, even considerately drew illustrations of his characters."

4

Unable to bear the relentless portrayal of "Secondhand bookstore clerk (25)" as a suspect of critical concern, I'd not paid due attention to recent news and print media—thus, my understanding of the precise details pertaining to the middle school girl, and the specific content of her will, was rather limited.

All I know is that she left a suicide note and tried to end her life by jumping from a building— which, frankly speaking, was more unbearable for me to contemplate than my own reality of being suspected. The backdrop that led a twelve-year-old to commit suicide is something I found too distressing to face, neither did I wish to know what drove her to that.

It was too sensitive a subject.

Even if it was the very reason for my hospitalization and job loss— the thought of her still hovering on the verge of death made it all the worse. I didn't expect that the suicide note would be so baffling— or maybe baffling isn't quite the right word.

After all, it has to do with someone's life—not only.

It has to do with someone's profession as a manga artist.

I never imagined that during my unconsciousness, things would turn out like this for Kondou-san…

"Is this the 'largely related to me' thing?"

"Well…had you not been in the exact spot where she fell, it would've blown up,"

Kondou-san said.

Perhaps to calm his nerves, he began now to peel an apple. I then noticed that I'd actually been holding the apple that he had peeled for me the whole time without taking a bite, and immediately took a bite.

"You mean?"

I asked him munching on juicy fruit. Kondou-san sighed and said,

'What I mean is, if it wasn’t for 'Secondhand bookstore clerk (25)’

becoming a media darling, the one under fire now would probably be Fumoto.“

Hold on. Shouldn’t I be the one sighing at this? It seemed I’d somehow helped Kondou-san without realizing it, just through a layer of separation— which did please me of course, but becoming a media darling (or 'media target’ rather) because of it was hardly something to celebrate.

"Ah, I don't mean to say that I'm glad you've became the punching bag.

But it is fact that I was saved because of it. I spoke up for you in the past,

and now not only can we call it even, there is even some left over, the change may even rival the national budget! And maybe in order to maintain the narrative that you are the culprit, the will has barely been reported on.”

That’s how it was.

Looking at it with tinted glasses, we could also say that in order to frame me, the media concealed the existence of the will— of course, considerations were also made because the “victim” was an underage girl who still showed signs of life. But if I hadn’t been standing at the spot where she fell that day, she probably would have gone to meet the King of Hell according to plan, and the contents of the will would likely have been made public, with the barrel pointed at the “culprit” who drove her to suicide.

Indeed— at Fumoto Shun.

“Uh, the piece that moved her, isn’t it that manga, the one currently being serialized, 'Verywell’, was it?”

“No, not that one. It’s Fumoto-sensei’s early work. It’s a short story he drew when he was just starting out… A one-shot called Cicerone."

Kondou-san explained.

I didn’t even know the name of his currently serializing work until just now, so of course I’d never heard of this one-shot or had any idea what it was about. And I didn’t understand the meaning of that loanword (I think)

"Cicerone," either.

"Well, that’s one only people in the know would know about. If she read that, she must really be a true fan of his. Having such a huge fan should have been a happy thing.”

“And what kind of manga is it?”

I wasn’t sure if I should ask, but if I didn’t, the conversation would grind to a halt, so I picked up the courage to ask.

“Hard to describe in one sentence…but for sure, there is suicide in the piece. From a certain point of view, if you ask whether it glorifies suicide, yes, it does. Since he had just debuted at the time and it was drawn when he was very young, should we call it radical…? It’s undeniable that some parts are sharp and thorny.”

Kondou-san seemed rather reluctant to elaborate—hmm.

I hadn’t seen the content so I won’t comment much, but from what I had gathered, some people were sure to blame that manga for the schoolgirl’s suicide, believing she imitated what she saw.

Especially since she wasn’t just any fan— she spelled it out in her note.

If it weren’t for the media making me out to be a suspect and giving it

widespread coverage, the prevailing narrative in the media would definitely have been full of tired arguments about “the harmful influence of manga on children” or that “creative freedom shouldn’t be unlimited”.

The thought alone sent shivers down my spine.

I used to half-jokingly, half-seriously curse heaven for treating me this way. But this was the first time I thanked my innate misfortune without the slightest hint of self-mockery. Even if there’s no need to be so dramatic, just thinking about what would have happened if the one passing by when she jumped wasn’t me with my inborn misfortune, but someone smaller, and the suicide girl and them were killed together…

No doubt Fumoto-sensei’s manga would have become the target of public backlash for taking two lives.

Needless to say that as a mystery novel reader, I stand on the side of defending creative freedom. But on the other hand, it’s not that I want to restrict press freedom either, yet I also don’t want authors to have to turn their imaginations into reality under so many constraints— this is my personal opinion.

Rather, not so much an opinion as just some random thought— expressing my feelings without much due consideration. Just my reflexive, unexamined thoughts— in fact, if I were to come across works full of blatant discrimination, I’m sure it would make me uncomfortable. I would certainly 'feel’ that children shouldn’t be exposed to such things.

There’s no solution to this dilemma.

All you end up with is mixed reviews.

If you ask whether creative works can influence their audience’s lives or sensibilities, the answer is of course yes— if there are readers who

became professional baseball or football players because of reading comics, then how can we definitively say there are none who became juvenile

delinquents or criminals? Not just children, even adults can be influenced by fiction, become better or worse people because of them — this is undeniable. Rather, one might say people seek out creative works precisely with the desire to change their own lives.

Be it comics, novels, movies, or nonfiction reality, it is basically impossible to come into contact with certain things and remain unaffected whatsoever. At the extreme, some readers or viewers might see the relentless media attacking me and think, “That suspicious guy deserves all the criticism he gets."—who knows.

No media under the sun does not influence its consumers.

Nevertheless, to play the relativist and go, "all judgments are intrinsically subjective” is equally meaningless. Hence, when both sides can only muster impressions that don’t amount to opinions, the debate is basically over— that’s what I think.

People are naturally influenced by what’s around them, but if your own feelings were to be overturned by this reasoning— that would be untenable for anyone. Of course, to be defeated in an argument is not to lose. It’s not a question of victory or defeat, and it’s not a question of value perspective.

“There’s a good chance it could have caused a tremendous scandal, but Kondou-san, we seem to have averted the worst case scenario, haven’t we?

A close shave, I suppose… or should we say it ended as an incident not worth calling an accident… Anyway, no longer a problem, is it?”

The endless argument has ended. And so has the problem, it’s solved.

While it's hard to say the deep root of it was resolved completely, still, by me becoming the scapegoat, the worst seems to have been avoided. It may not be a perfectly tidy resolution, but hasn't the matter been settled?

"No, it's not that simple. Certainly thanks to you— although it's weird to say— since it didn't become public, the problem didn't surface. However, even if it didn't become public, the man in question still found out."

"The man in question?"

"Fumoto-sensei."

He was greatly devastated, Kondou-san told me.

Someone passed this news on to him. Who told him anyway? Well, I can't get too angry about it now, but I can't help feeling for Kondou-san's feelings.

"For his own work to nearly take a child's life— it made him so upset he's considering putting down his pen— or rather, it's making his creative work painful."

What a forced pun.

But I understand the feeling, even if I can't fully understand as I've never heard of a manga directly leading to something like this. Though it's a sad universal truth that young people have been driven to suicide after being inspired by novels, plays and other creative works since historical times.

That brings no comfort here of course.

If the manga artist he has such high hopes for is being driven into such dire straits, it's not unthinkable that Kondou-san would be anxious. As the magazine's editor and as a human, it's hard not to

share in that distress.

That's the kind of man he is.

But if there is any advice I could give as a third party regarding this matter, ultimately, it's a hardship that Fumoto-sensei will have to overcome by himself I think. Or if he's reached the point where he doesn't even want to draw manga anymore, then that decision should be respected.

"I understand that too of course. We are trying to persuade him in consultation with his direct editor, but in the end it will come down to his own judgment."

"Seems fair. Yeah, it's not my place to interfere…I'm being too nosy.

Terribly rude of me. But why tell me about this?'"

After hearing the whole story, I felt this was entirely a trade secret— even though it was closely related to what happened to me, was it really okay for him to tell me the contents of a will involving Fumoto-sensei's dismissal? And wasn't he originally asking me to introduce Kyouko-san to him… From listening to it all, I still felt this wasn't a case suitable to entrust to the forgetful detective.

Not just the forgetful detective; no detective at all— because there's neither a mystery to solve nor a criminal to catch.

"You're absolutely right, Yakusuke— only if the story I just told is true."

"Only if it's true?"

—Wasn't it true?

I was listening the whole time thinking it was.

All this while I have been burdened with countless unfounded accusations labeled "facts.” Just like how now the media was portraying me as a critical suspect and making a big fuss. Even if you told me that everything just now was “fabricated,” I could not easily deny it either.

Nothing can be certain— a certain perfectionist detective once said this to me.

“Hmm…I may have misled you. The reality is what it is. I didn’t see the original suicide note but the police showed me a copy and revealed some insider details that haven’t been told to you yet— Simply put, Fumoto-sensei’s current circumstances are not entirely separate from yours."

"Is that so…”

“But you know, something just doesn’t feel quite right about it.”

Kondou-san said.

Despite his use of “feel quite” in an offhand way, his tone was one of firm conviction.

Something was off.

What could it be that was off?

“On the flip side, you could say it feels too contrived— I can’t quite put it in words, but there’s something forced about it."

"Forced…”

Was there some… conspiracy or something?

A plot to undermine a promising young manga creator expected to carry the future of the magazine, making a middle school girl leave behind a suicide note like that and killing herself— that's what he was getting at?

Ridiculous.

A story like that would be not only forced but delusional paranoia that even I wouldn't entertain.

"Oh. Of course I don't mean to spout such wild speculation, and if she really did attempt suicide because of Fumoto-sensei's work, as editor-in-chief I have no intention of shirking responsibility either. But the malaise I feel makes me think there's more to it."

Malaise was…really far too abstract to base anything on. Even so, can't ignore a felt sense of unease.

Is this why he had requested Kyouko-san?

This is why he needed Okitegami Kyouko?

At last, the puzzle pieces fell into place.

Kondou-san's request was to find out what exactly was the malaise he felt.

He wanted to know "that feeling" which he himself could not articulate and I too could not sense just by listening to his account.

If there was nothing, of course there was no way of knowing what to find out, and even if there was something, Kyouko-san might not necessarily be able to point it out.

After Satoi-sensei's case and then Sunaga-sensei's case, Kondou-san

probably overestimates Kyouko-san's abilities more than necessary. She really just happens to be relatively better at strictly abiding by confidentiality agreements; she is not omnipotent.

Well, maybe Kondou-san only meant to smooth things over in his own way of doing things. He seems to be trying to play matchmaker between me and Kyouko-san at every opportunity. But he shouldn't have the leisure to be concerned about our idle affairs, with his circumstances.

"No no. I know what you're trying to say, Yakusuke, but I have my reasons too. It has to be Okitegami-san, no one else. Of course since this isn't something I want brought to light now, it's natural I want it handled in absolute secrecy, but the point I want to emphasize in particular this time is speed, rather than secrecy. And that's why I need Okitegami Kyouko. I mean to rely on Okitegami-san's talent as the fastest detective. As we're far too pressed for time."

"Pressed for time...? Why?"

Yes, Kyouko-san had another title besides "the forgetful detective," which is "the fastest detective." But why the urgent need for speed?

A week had already passed since the incident. I hate to say it but at this point, no matter how fast we are, it may be too late.

"I'm aware that Fumoto-sensei is going through a tough time, but you see,'Very Well' is a weekly serial manga,"

Said Kondou-san, practical as always.

He said he wouldn't stop an artist that really wants to quit, but as the editor-in-chief of the manga magazine, he seemed reluctant to let the artist he had high hopes for leave the industry just like that.

Just as a detective had secrets to keep, he said,

"Manga artists, too, got deadlines to meet."



Chapter 2:

Kakushidate Yakusuke Commissioning



1

"I'm Okitegami Kyouko, the forgetful detective. Nice to meet you."

The next day.

As usual, even though it wasn't our first meeting, Kyouko-san appeared again saying just that and walked up to the bed centered in the hospital room.

"Oooh."

She stared intently at my right leg—right thigh, specifically, where the fracture was and the cast was put on.

"K-Kyouko-san?"

I asked, baffled and anxious about her fixed gaze and our unexpected proximity.

"Nothing, pardon me,"

Kyouko-san straightened her hitherto hunched back.

"I fancy the idea of a broken bone. So I lose myself while inspecting one."

It was quite something to say in front of someone nursing broken bones.

Well, I suppose it made for a suitable icebreaker for our supposed first meeting. Maybe breaking my bones was worth it after all.

Was it, though?

However, it didn't seem to be just a joke to close the first meeting distance.

Because Kyouko-san said,

"Let me touch it for a bit!"

Without even waiting for my consent, and she touched the plaster cast on my right arm as if examining a patient. Huh, getting a cast makes you so popular; I felt like I was back in school.

Maybe it was the hospital setting, Kyouko-san— already with white hair— was dressed entirely in white. She wore an embroidered long dress with a coarse striped cotton blouse with long sleeves, and had a thin silk scarf wrapped around her neck—the only black item were her conspicuously dark glasses frames.

"My, how wonderful, how cool."

Why was she so fascinated with a cast... She moved as though scrutinizing a piece of evidence in a case, and I could only let her do as she pleased.

Some people really have incomprehensible hobbies.

I don't think my plaster cast was related to this case... Well, in the

"Unreturned, Unprocessed" incident, it was by picking up the smallest

threads of clues left at the scene that Kyouko-san succeeded in grabbing the culprit.

Perhaps from the two casts on me she really could dig up a truth about the middle schooler's attempted suicide that would make one's jaw drop— I didn't dare casually ask what she was doing.

Rather than compromise, I asked Kyouko-san this.

"Have you never broken a bone before?"

With no other intention than the literal meaning of the words.

"Never! That's why I'm so fascinated by it!"

She replied, not sparing a glance at me and continuously touching the cast.

I couldn't just blithely accept her answer at face value.

Kyouko-san, being a detective who loved to put herself in danger, it was hard to imagine she had never been injured before. And even if she thought she had never broken a bone, it was likely just that she had simply forgotten.

2

With Kyouko-san wholly absorbed in the plaster on my hand and leg, allow me to explain the defining traits of this forgetful detective. When I first commissioned her she was still a detective known only to those in the know, but lately the forgetful detective's fame has steadily risen; perhaps you have already heard of her.

But with her being the forgetful detective, some may have already forgotten.

Okitegami Kyouko, chief of Okitegami Detective Agency.

Though since it was a one-person company, she was both the chief and the sole employee, handling everything from business to PR to accounting by herself—a detective without a Watson at her side.

Such a lone wolf of a detective was a bit of a rare sight.

I understood even then that she was highly skilled, but the defining trait of Kyouko-san as a detective was not actually her abilities. As can be inferred from her nickname of "forgetful detective," the keyword for her was: forgetful.

Kyouko-san only has today.

Her memories reset every day—sleep the night, wake in the morning, and everything that happened the day before is wiped clean from her mind.

No matter what kind of investigation she participated in or what kind of truths she uncovered—the client's affairs or the murderer's affairs, all information would vanish like smoke, without exception.

All memories erased.

Strictly speaking, for a detective whose job implied prying into others'

secrets and exploring the underbelly of society, this was an extremely advantageous trait. From a confidentiality viewpoint, there simply couldn't be a more stalwart assurance from any other detective.

It was indeed because of this quirk that Kyouko-san had also undertaken many commissions that delved into state secrets or international affairs.

Even dangerous requests that could threaten her life if exposed, which most detectives would shy away from, she investigates fearlessly.

It's so miraculous it's more of a gift from nature than a quirk. Of course, such an advantage comes with its challenges.

Her memory resets daily— meaning no matter the case, it has to be solved within a day— because the evidence gathered and deductions made would be forgotten in a day.

Be it intricate cases or impossible crimes, she is on the clock.

The Forgetful Detective, while maintaining an absolute seal of secrecy, must also abide by a time limit—otherwise she cannot complete her tasks.

Thus was born "the fastest detective."

Being forgetful, she became the fastest— the fastest detective was none other than the forgetful detective.

The famed detective solving any case in a day.

Specifically, when taking on a commission, "can it be solved within a day"

was her criteria, and only when she was sure that it could be solved would the Okitegami Detective Agency take on investigating the case. In other words, the reason Kyouko-san took on this case—the middle school girl suicide case introduced through me by Kondou-san—despite it being a request that looked to the layman's eyes like it didn't even have a place to begin, was that she was convinced the tangled knot could be undone within the day.

"Ahh... This has been most satisfying. Thank you."

Kyouko-san said some incomprehensible words of thanks and finally let me off the hook. Due to my propensity to be wrongly accused, I've had the forgetful detective help me out of trouble several times, but I was beginning to genuinely worry whether I had simply missed opportunities in the past to realize this woman might actually be a dangerous character… So, her decision to spare me left me sighing with relief from the depths of my being.

By the looks of it, (it looked like she'd really had enough fun, so naturally) her frolicking with my plaster cast hadn't been her true purpose for this visit; Kyouko-san finally came to the point.

"As we're pressed for time, we best get down to work. You're Kakushidate Yakusuke, yes? Pleased to make your acquaintance."

Without even knowing who I was, she just felt her way over my broken areas in that very pressed time. Just what was her deal?

Also, I had been saved from predicaments many times by the forgetful detective, but of course, Kyouko-san had forgotten ever rescuing me from such situations. Be it the first or the hundredth time, to her, I was always someone she's meeting for the first time.

If I'm being honest with myself, being forgotten every time like this was pretty depressing— about as tough as being wrongly suspected.

Even if we forget her merits as the forgetful detective and the fastest detective, Kyouko-san still was exceptionally capable, if not top class. But my hesitation to seek her help each time stemmed from my reluctance to suffer this blow.

That's why I only request Kyouko-san's help when I absolutely need her

"forgetfulness" or "speed"— and like now, when I have been asked to

mediate.

...Come to think of it, I hadn't even introduced myself yet and she had said

"nice to meet you," so how did she know who I was? I did give my name when I called this morning to request her services, but she shouldn't know that the person on the phone was I.

Perhaps my puzzled expression gave it away, and Kyouko-san pointed to the bed railing.

"Voilà."

More specifically, she was pointing at the patient name card attached to the bed railing— which had my name, Kakushidate Yakusuke, written on it along with date of birth and blood type.

This observation may seem trivial—hardly what one would call the

"observational skills required of a detective." But perhaps that's what deduction is, the accumulation of such minute discoveries.

"The time now is ten past ten."

Paying no heed to my admiration, Kyouko-san glanced at the clock placed by the hospital room window. As she said, the hour and minute hands formed a nice angle.

We'd agreed to meet earlier at ten.

In other words, Kyouko-san had spent exactly ten minutes playing with my broken bones despite the limited time. I regretted allowing her to waste ten of those minutes like this. Even though the fault was not mine.

"A complex situation we are dealing with. We'll have to coordinate our plans with both Kondou-san and Fumoto-sensei. Regardless, let's set our initial goal to solve this within the next twelve hours. That is to say, by ten tonight!"

"Wait… twelve, twelve hours!?"

I exclaimed in surprise at the revelation of such a specific timeframe. The fastest detective however considered this more than ample.

She had planned a meeting with Konodu-san and Fumoto-sensei that afternoon to discuss the details. Understandably, she meant to provide ample time for that.

"Firstly, allow me to pose a few questions to you. Though you haven't directly contracted me, you nonetheless seem involved in this case,"

With a decisiveness unimaginable from someone idly playing with plaster, Kyouko-san got straight to business with the utmost efficiency.

"Ye-yes, I am,"

I answered. There was no denying my involvement as I'd been at the heart of the incident and nearly lost my life as a consequence.

She then persisted,

"Before we proceed, Kakushidate-san, is it safe to assume you hold no murderous intent towards the middle school girl?"

With a question that sapped all my strength away.

My hand and leg already broken, how was I supposed to go on living if I kept getting sapped like this— but if you said getting questions like these was normal, then so be it.

It appears Kyouko-san wanted to start by confirming whether I was

"truly" falsely accused or not. This was not meant specifically for me; as a fundamental part of Kyouko-san's attitude as detective she seemed to have an unshakable creed that "the client lies."

It was a lonely but accurate truth.

In my eyes, a relationship where we'd known each other for so long yet were unable to build any trust, filled with unspeakable futility and emptiness.

Not unexpected that we couldn't get close to each other, her being the forgetful detective and all...

"Before I received the call and arrived here, I had already glanced through the contents. Some media reports referred to it in passing, so I wanted to reconfirm. Please don't take it to heart,"

She said. It was clear to me she was waiting for a response; she wouldn't gloss over it.

"No such thing ever happened,"

I said helplessly.

"I didn't know what happened initially. My mind was empty; I could not remember anything. All I remember was leaving work for home. I heard a cracking noise followed by a blackout. Next thing I knew, I woke up in a hospital bed, buried under an almost unbelievable reality— a girl had plunged from the top of a building on top of me. This preposterous fact, I only learned about later,"

I was beset with overwhelming woe, so much so I sighed to the heavens.

As if my luck couldn’t get any worse, I became a prime suspect. The sprawling details that came later were enough to make me hang my head and weep.

"I see. It would be a long shot to calculate the exact time and place of her landing. Just catching her, let alone rushing forward to harm her, quite a stretch."

"Right, right? I can't fathom why they would accuse me."

I sent her a plea for help unconsciously, just like old times. Clearly it wasn't about clearing my name this time, but it seemed I had grown the habit of seeking her help whenever I saw her.

That being said, although I chose to ignore those reports soon enough, they were, just like Kondou-san said, lacking in authenticity. Therefore, the widely discussed reports began to die down the day before yesterday.

Or perhaps they were preparing to sensationalize other trends; just the nature of media.

"But Kakushidate-san, didn’t you notice? If you had seen the middle school girl falling, you could've dodged,"

She asked this quite naturally.

If I had dodged, while I'd be unharmed, it wouldn't be the case for the middle school girl. She was gravely wounded and unconscious. She might have died instantly if I'd stepped away. From a detective's standpoint, it was a reasonable question. I wasn't saintly enough to assert I wouldn't have dodged if I had noticed.

Because I did not see it coming, it led to this misfortune.

On a side note, it’s rare for one to walk on the street and look straight up—

who would anticipate a girl falling on them from the sky?

"I understand. I will choose to believe you."

Kyouko-san seemed to accept my word. I gave a sigh of relief and the burden lifted upon her trusting me, but suddenly, she spoke again.

"Kakushidate."

Did she still have doubts about me? I felt disheartened.

But that was not the case at all; as she'd said, her investigation of me was finished. Because what Kyouko-san had asked next was:

"Since 'Kakushidate' is kind of a mouthful, may I address you as

'Yakusuke' from now onwards?"

4

Kyouko-san only has today. All memories of before yesterday, without exception, are wiped clean and reset to zero— but experiences remain.

Since we've known each other so long, her body still remembers even if her mind doesn't, that's why she wants to call me Yakusuke— or was thinking like that a bit optimistic? Just wishful thinking?

The real reason was probably just that Kakushidate is harder to pronounce than Yakusuke, or perhaps because the latter has fewer syllables and saves a bit of time— or maybe it's just based on the rationale of choosing the

"fastest" option. It's also possible she just felt like it today (or maybe touching the fracture elated her), and the next time we meet, with her reset memories, she's sure to go back to calling me Kakushidate.

Just a trivial thing of this degree.

Such a trivial thing made my heart flutter yet Kyouko-sam herself didn't seem to care in the slightest, carrying on as if I had already agreed.

"Yakusuke-san, I did hear the rough situation from your call, but allow me to rearrange it."

The fastest detective does not stand still.

"Aside from the marvelous… oh, I mean, serious harm you suffered, this time I'm asked to investigate the reason for a middle school girl's suicide attempt, correct?"

"Y-yes, that's right."

"What she wrote is very detrimental for my client, so confirming its authenticity, that's what this is about, correct?"

"...Mhm, right."

She's right that she's right, but the way she said it made it sound like Kondou-san and I were conspiring to cover up that will, and I was starting to feel guilty.

Sure she could interpret it like that—why should anyone be looking for some sort of "truth" beyond the handwritten will she left behind? Wanting to find some other truth could easily be seen as shirking responsibility, as shameful behavior.

"Responsibility… hm?"

Kyouko-san smiled meaningfully.

Meaningfully, and shrewdly.

"She may have imitated manga to attempt suicide, but I do not think the author bears any responsibility."

"Huh?"

"Apologies, just my personal opinion. I'm a detective, I only think in legal terms. If a reader really did commit suicide because of a manga, the charge would probably be incitement to suicide, but there's almost no chance of such a prosecution succeeding."

"....."

Kyouko-san said that this was her "opinion"...but I feel such a firm and steadfast opinion could just as well be called a "viewpoint". At least it's different from my "impressions".

What she said may be salvation for Kondou-san, but for me it's still not that clear-cut.

Legal liability aside, the question of moral responsibility was another matter entirely. Even just the example Kyouko-san cited earlier, of using the law to assign blame, could itself provoke an emotional backlash.

"Ahaha. If you put it that way, the term 'moral responsibility' is quite strange, isn't it— oh, come to think of it, maybe there's already a law like that and I've just forgotten it. Book burnings and censorship is nothing new in history after all."

Regardless, the forgetful detective of today alone clearly isn't equipped to resolve the issue of regulating creative freedom.

Kyouko-san shrugged her shoulders, bringing the derailed conversation back on track.

"All I can resolve is this particular case."

That's of course enough— debating over "laws that restrict creative freedom" or "an atmosphere that suppresses creative freedom" here would be pointless.

Still, on the topic of creative freedom, I expect that by this afternoon, Kyouko-san will be discussing it with the key man, Fumoto...

I do hope she doesn't say anything too sharp— I'm worried enough as it is.

Kyouko-san's appearance being as composed as you see, perhaps owing to her attitude of "I'll forget it tomorrow anyway", she can be completely oblivious to propriety when conversing or debating.

I don't think it would be ideal at all for her to take that approach with Fumoto-sensei who's driven himself into a corner thinking of withdrawing from the world entirely...

To someone self-blaming, saying "You are not to blame at all"— this kind of total denial of their feelings may cause them to shut their heart even more and go "You don't understand me at all".

There's no telling how things will develop.

"I hope you can promise me first that the task I'm about to take on is still an investigation after all, and even if the results are not what Kondou-san hoped for, I will not distort the contents of the report. This one point, please be sure to understand."

"Ah, okay. I can certainly understand that. I don't mean to ask you to fabricate investigation results either."

Some detectives have claimed that making things up is part of the job (known as "fabricating detectives"), but I know well that Kyouko-san was not that kind of detective— moreover, Kondou-san would be the last person to want such despicable conduct.

Regarding how to respond from the standpoint of the editorial department and publishing company, that's another thing. If the cause of a middle school girl's suicide attempt really is related to works previously published by them, he wouldn't evade that fact either—

Just the kind of guy he is.

Therefore— what needed to be faced was the malaise he felt.

Something didn't felt quite right— everything felt too right.

Somehow deliberate…

Recalling Kondou-san's words again, I still don't understand his implication, or perhaps what he wants Kyouko-san to investigate is not just the truth behind the incident, but also to find out through her investigation what exactly is the malaise he senses.

"Aha, I've got it all figured out already."

Out of the blue, Kyouko-san casually said this.

"Really? So you've already figured it out… Wait, what?"

Because she spoke so casually, I almost let her words go in one ear and out the other.

Say what?

"Wha..what do you mean you've got it all figured out?"

"Just what I said, I've got a theory. I figured out what Kondou-san was saying during my previewing. Yes, I agree with him, that the whole thing is full of malaise. It's truly worthy of a professional editor to pick up on that, his sensibilities are rich."

"……"

If such is the case, the sensibilities of professional detectives should also be very rich—it seems that she had already grasped what Kondou-san's malaise was before meeting him in person.

With this previewing, won't class be dismissed early? The fastest detective has indeed performed her knack to the fullest.

"That kind of discomfort, can it be clearly articulated in words? Not just based on feeling.."

"Because it's a feeling that something is not right, it's a senses problem, but it can still be described quite clearly with words! I believe it can be cogently explained to a certain extent."

To really explain the 'offness' that Kondou-san was unable to articulate so clearly herself—I don't believe it.

"Hmm...how should I put this. I don't exactly know Kondou-san's character very well, but I guess he probably has some idea. As I speculate, it's not that he can't describe it with words, it's more that he's struggling to describe it."

"Is that so...?"

I don't quite understand the subtle difference between "can't describe" and

"struggling to describe."...If Kondou-san had already noticed what that malaise was, he wouldn't have entrusted her, right?

...Incidentally, Kyouko-san said she didn't exactly know Kondou-san's character, but they have actually met several times before.

She just forgot.

"Could you please tell me? What exactly is that malaise?"

"If I answered your question now I would be forced to explain the same reasoning twice, once in the morning and once in the afternoon, so please allow me to clarify in the afternoon."

She firmly refused me with a sweet smile.

It seemed that for a detective who values efficiency, having to waste time presenting the same reasoning twice would be insufferable to the point of being "forcing", as she put it.

Clarify it when meeting Kondou-san and Fumoto-sensei in the afternoon.

Certainly a reasonable approach. So what about wasting time playing with my plaster cast...

"Since you have the opportunity, why don't you try reasoning too, Yakusuke-san? Because with just the information at your disposal, you can already establish a certain degree of conjecture."

She said.

"O-okay...I'll try my best."

I didn't think I could get anywhere just by trying my best, but since she'd proposed it, I had no choice but to go along.

"However, grasping that something feels off is hardly considered getting the detective job done. Therefore, now that the details of the request have been clarified, we ought to get going, Yakusuke-san."

"Huh? Get going where..."

"Since I'm a woman of action and not some armchair detective, shall we walk and talk?"

If anyone was an armchair detective, it would be me, crippled as I was.

That being said, I was well aware Kyouko-san was an action type. She was the type who can't sit still, and who knows where she'll run off to if I take my eyes off her.

It was a cruel request to make of a man with a fractured leg, 'Shall we walk and talk?', but I decided not to make a fuss about it. If we were heading to the Sakusousha, wasn't it a bit early?

We were to meet with Kondou-san at one in the afternoon— it wasn't even eleven yet. From the hospital to the publishing company, it wouldn't take more than half an hour, even with delays. Even if we wanted to have lunch on the way, this was too early to start.

If that's the case, wouldn't it be better to stay in that hospital room and clarify some details first, instead of chatting while walking? No matter how much you value speed, there is no point in wasteful rushing around.

Kyouko-san should understand this better than anyone.

"No no, we're not heading directly to the publishing company.I want to do an on site investigation first. That is, the place where you had the fortune... oops, misfortune to break a bone. We're heading to the mixed residential-commercial building where the middle school girl—

Sakasezaka Masaka-chan—jumped from."

"……!"

Detectives are amazing. She already knew the full name of the middle school girl even though it hadn't been publicly announced. But, I hadn't considered visiting the scene.

Although the attempted suicide of a child, a very severe case indeed. It lacked the "eventfulness" typical of mystery novels, so generally, there was no need for an on-site investigation.

However, Kyouko-san seemed to think otherwise.

I wasn't sure how necessary it was, but she, who wasn't keen on wasting time explaining the same reasoning twice, must have had her reasons for wanting to go.

If she wanted me to guide her, I had no reason to refuse.

"But, Kyouko-san, before we go to the publishing company, um... if we make a detour to where the girl jumped, we'll be pressed for time. Because the direction is just opposite…"

"Oh, that's simple."

Kyouko-san said, nonchalantly.

"We just have to skip lunch."



Chapter 3:

Kakushidate Yakusuke Guiding



1

If you mean to save time thoroughly, the most appropriate mode of transportation when moving should be taxi.

However, forgetful detective Kyouko-san prefers not to take taxis while on the job—There are voice and video recorders in the car.

Since her principle of action is to strictly observe the duty of confidentiality and to forget everything cleanly by the next day, avoiding having every detail of her movements at work recorded is reasonable. But avoiding even vehicle recorders seems a bit paranoid. Still, being a detective who has ‘forgetfulness’ as her selling point and rarely takes notes, perhaps such concerns are just part and parcel of the job.

Though I so wished she’d give a little thought to asking a fracture patient to lead the way, we opted to take the tram to the scene.

As I mentioned before, the doctor actually gave me permission to leave the hospital as soon as I was able to. The troublesome part was, there was no crutch that suited my height—there was one, but it was an old model, and with my right hand also broken, it was tough to handle.

It wasn’t totally unusable though. I had resigned myself to struggle with it when Kyouko-san, observing my difficulty getting out of bed, came to stand on my right-hand side.

“Please. If you think I’m a heartless detective, you are mistaken,”

She was apparently offering to substitute herself for my crutch.

“Whoooaoaoa…!“

"Don’t be shy to put all your weight on me. I may not look it, but I’m pretty strong.”

Walking did feel considerably easier this way, but how could I let Kyouko-san do this much for me… I tried to politely decline at first, and when I realized she was supporting my weight while sneakily touching the plaster on my leg and hand, gave up on that idea.

I even had the suspicion her insistence on taking the train was just an excuse to freely touch my plastered limbs, but this wasn’t the time to question it.

Actually, I didn’t really want to know.

“Now then, please lead the way.”

“Okay… it’s just three stops by train from here to the scene, but we’ll have to walk straight there to the station like this.”

“I couldn’t ask for more."

I couldn’t ask for more…

As such, the two of us were leaning on each other as we walked, our bodies pressed close together and quite conspicuous on the street. I felt very shy about it, but Kyouko-san did not seem to mind at all.

Wasn’t this a bit careless of her… Most people seeing me with a plaster cast would probably just think Kyouko-san was thoughtfully taking good care of me. Oh well, at least they wouldn’t see through this woman’s obsession with broken bones—that was good enough.

"Speaking of guiding, the suicidal middle school girl referenced in her will a short manga by Fumoto-sensei. The title is just that."

"Oh? Is that so?"

True to Kyouko-san's words, we walked and talked.

Being so close to her—practically close enough to feel her breath, made my heart race and my cheeks flush. I had no confidence in my ability to converse.

If memory serves me, the title of Fumoto-sensei's short manga should not be this.

Though her memory as the forgetful detective was flawless to a fault, for the span of one day until it resets. It was a correctness that mortals like me could not compare to.

If this was her 'preview' result, then she must not be mistaken… And her return to calling the suicidal girl 'middle school girl' was most likely due to us having left the hospital ward and moved to a more exposed location.

We can't be too careful about where and by whom we might be overheard, with endless media outlets trailing after me, the person of interest in this case. Even without the paparazzi, my reputation for getting involved in incidents was rumored to have caught the attention of public security.

…If the rumors were to be true, I wonder what they would think of me, walking out of the hospital ward hand-in-hand with a woman with all white hair.

"But I remember, Kondou-san told me it was called Cicerone or something like that…"

“That’s not wrong either. 'Cicerone’ is Italian for 'person who guides'—in the work it refers to the guide on the journey of death.”

So that’s what it meant. I didn’t know what it meant before—I thought maybe it was a word the author invented—but the title was indeed very specific.

Kondou-san said that manga had romanticized depictions of suicide—

Kyouko-san had already read through it during her “preview,” hadn’t she?

I asked her.

“Yes, I’ve read through Fumoto-sensei’s works once. There aren’t actually that many,”

She replied.

As usual, her reading speed was remarkably fast. According to Kondou-san, Fumoto-sensei’s experience should not be short, so I figure the quantity is still not small.

“Hm…any thoughts?"

"Pardon?”

“N-nothing. I mean, since you actually read it…umm, what was it like?”

The ambiguity of the question was due to the fact that I didn’t want to commit myself. What I really wanted to ask was about the content of the manga, that is, would it make people want to kill themselves after reading it, but I felt that was too tasteless to ask, so I didn’t.

There was actually no need ro say that much to a detective like her. She considered a bit, then went 'Oh' before adding,

“Well, let’s wait until the afternoon to talk about Cicerone—it would be unfair for you to form unnecessary preconceptions based on my impressions before you read it.”

“O-Okay.”

I had no intention of reading it… But as one involved, I may be lacking in integrity if I deny to read it. Maybe I should borrow it from Kondou-san later at the company. My reading speed was nowhere near that of Kyouko-san, but it’s short, so it shouldn’t even take five minutes.

I was thinking I could put off dealing with this story for the time being, but then Kyouko-san continued.

“For instance, aren’t you aware of the promotional blurb for Kyuusaku Yumeno’s 'Dogra Mogra’ at the time of its release which claimed 'Read and Go Mad’?”

Was she trying to make small talk? It couldn’t be.

In every minute and second that she couldn’t afford to waste, she shouldn’t have the idle pleasure of idle chatting with people about mystery novels.

I had read it, and I didn’t find such a blurb there.

“…Surely there wasn’t anyone that actually went mad, right?”

“None reported officially, at least.”

Her memory could be trusted on this—trivia about a novel as old as

Dogra Mogra has to predate her ability to retain knowledge.

“I certainly didn’t go mad!”

Being in the process of fiddling with the plaster on my body made this claim somewhat dubious… As for me, however minimal my self-awareness, I knew I didn’t go mad from reading that book.

“If one reads nothing but masterpieces and let them have no effect on his life, his sensibility has to be abnormal.”

Such strong words, perhaps a touch of book-lover sentimentality.

Dogra Mogra was too complicated for me, to be frank, with many parts I couldn’t really understand. I might have different thoughts on a second read.

Having walked to the station, we went to buy our tickets. For the same reason she doesn’t take taxis, Kyouko-san doesn’t use prepaid cards on the job—they leave a record. Even if it takes a little extra time, this small delay could be quickly made up by the fastest detective.

Luckily, as if timed to our arrival, the train pulled into the station. I dearly hoped we wouldn’t be late for our appointment with Kondou-san due to our on site investigation.

“Please, have a seat.”

Kyouko-san finally released me—free again at last, I felt regretful about that as well, how capricious of me.

I suppose moving around with two broken bones took more energy than I imagined, so being able to sit down was a blessing. Serving as a giant’s cane must have been no easy task for her either. I saw her sit

beside me and stretch with a long sigh.

“Yawnn…”

Then, her eyes closed.

“Crap, p-please don’t sleep!”

I didn’t have the heart to say such words to her, given she was only fatigued from supporting my build. But I had to be firm—it would spell disaster if she fell asleep here.

The detective who forgets, whose memories reset every day.

It’s a special constitution to be precise, where her memories reset on waking, whether from a nap or a full night’s rest.

Now, with the rhythmic rocking of the train, dozing off even for a moment would wipe clean any memory of my request, the information about this case she had previewed—and also the insight she had gained of the malaise that lurked in Kondou-san heart during the course of previewing.

All would be utterly forgotten.

This was the worst possible situation for the forgetful detective, yet the most likely danger I had to watch out for.

“It’s all right, I got plenty of sleep last night,"

Kyouko-san said and still she stood up from her chair, perhaps worried she might fall asleep sitting.

Speaking of, since she could not remember when she fell asleep, it was also difficult to say whether she really got "plenty of sleep” last

night…

Whether one feels well rested or not after sleep depends on the

individual—some may still feel tired after ten hours of sleep, while others may feel refreshed after just one hour of napping—she may have been working on a commission late into the night yesterday before finishing it.

Not being able to adjust when to sleep and when to wake is the fatal flaw of the forgetful detective. Drowsiness is not something one can control.

“If you want to write a story about rewarding the good and punishing the evil, you’ll inevitably have to depict the evil alongside the good. If you want to portray intense good, you must also intensely depict its corresponding evil. It’s hard to guarantee that readers won’t be influenced by this part.”

The topic that was once paused suddenly resurfaced, leaving me momentarily unable to react.

But as long as she kept talking, she wouldn’t fall asleep,

“So you think reading so-called 'good literature’, like what’s on recommended lists, isn’t necessarily beneficial?”

So I agreed.

“Exactly. One could even argue that a story utterly devoid of evil might have a negative impact. Imagine a child, raised on a steady diet of sweet love stories and classic novels, believing every boy to be a gallant, handsome prince, both tender and chivalrous—venturing into society with an impression like that, you’re bound to be sorely disappointed. The gap between fantasy and reality chews you up and spits you out!”

Hypothetically speaking. Yet her words had a ring of truth to them and it all sounded very real. If this was an episode from Kyouko-san's life before becoming the forgetful detective—when she was a teenager —then I was hearing truly precious tales.

Had she been chewed up and spit out…?

"Such is the challenge of parenting… or rather, education. Children don't always grow up as adults expect."

"I-I guess."

Although she cited good literature as an example, when I was a child I never read the books recommended to me by my parents or or by my teachers. I was more drawn to comics and cartoons that made adults frown.

When reading detective novels, I'd often be criticized for indulging in

"stories of murder". Looking back on it now, it might have been these stories that cultivated my propensity for false accusations. What baffled me was why adults would reject such fascinating tales.

Everyone has been a child once, why can't they understand a child's mind?

This thought had young me scratching my head.

"Well, precisely because everyone was once a child, they tend not to comprehend."

"Huh? What do you mean by that, Kyouko-san?"

"Ah, simply put, when everyone was young and not so disciplined.

Calling them 'innocent' is just to sugarcoat it. These are the people who,

having experienced foolishness and impulsive periods in their lives, feel the need to censor literature.”

“……”

It was too uncouth to say. Her smile was friendly and her tone was cheerful, but in fact she was delivering truly devastating critique… But recalling my own childhood, it’s hard to say she was wrong.

Who could say she was wrong?

“Life begins with imitating parents. Perhaps parents don’t want their children to stumble in the same places they did. But to deny that sentiment without any explanation, that’s kind of preposterous.”

“Is, is it?”

That’s surprising to hear.

The conversation so far had given me the impression that Kyouko-san opposed the view that fiction should be condemned as evil. But it would seem she did not look at things so one-sidedly.

“Regardless of the content of Fumoto-sensei’s works, I believe that literature exists which could potentially sway readers toward suicide —

crafty tales that glamourize suicide or tragic love to sway the reader’s values,”

She clarified, almost as if to prove my assumptions wrong.

“The cases where authors end up following the bleak path outlined by their own works are spread across the world. For the sake of

argument, the influence of literature cannot be ignored. But if you really want to blame the author, you must prove that there is a statistical difference of at least 5% between the number of readers who attempt suicide after reading the work and the number of readers who do not."

The larger the reader's pool, the higher the probability of individuals who may conduct antisocial activities. Say we find a crime novel on a criminal's bookshelf, do we speculate whether the book motivated the crime, or was the book so riveting that even an antisocial individual couldn't resist it?

She seemed more focused on concrete data rather than hypothetical situations.

"It's true, not everyone who reads soccer manga becomes a soccer player…"

"Yes, just like how not everyone who reads a romantic manga can find romance themselves."

She seemed to take issue with the portrayal of love in manga. I wonder what Kyouko-san's own girlhood was like.

"Of course," she continued.

"Nor can everyone who reads mystery novels become a famed detective."

Fair enough.

Even harder than reading mystery novels and becoming a murderer, it would seem.

2

To accommodate Kyouko-san's request, I've suddenly had to make time during my break to go examine the scene, but if I do that it'll become completely for personal reasons. Still, I wanted to take the opportunity to get a troublesome errand out of the way—No, to say I want to 'get it out of the way' is kind of wrong, because that is not my meaning at all. This is not something to be gotten out of the way as an afterthought.

I may not be the fastest detective, but I had to settle the matter as soon as possible, as a matter of priority—

My resignation procedures.

The seven-story mixed-use building whose rooftop the middle school girl jumped from was actually the same one where I worked, at a secondhand bookstore named Truth Hall on the first floor.

It was a very traditional shop specializing in mystery novels. The store, roughly thirteen square meters in size, was crammed full of used books, managed single-handedly by the owner—an epitome of a personal-run bookstore. I had a short spell working here.

It was just as I had gotten off work and left the bookstore to go home that the middle school girl fell on me.

Every time I found a job, I would be embroiled in workplace disputes and accused without cause. I needed detectives to clear my name, but always

ended up unable to stay, even getting fired—this inexplicable vicious cycle kept recurring, leaving me with virtually no freedom to choose my career. Truth Hall was a job I chose very proactively and positively.

Kondou-san might call it “having a foot in two boats”, but to me, the key was the store’s specialty in trading mystery novels. As a memorandum, I, who have been recording my experiences of incredible and baffling scandals, am eager to enhance my understanding of mystery and detective stories. I wanted to read not only bestsellers making the rounds but also more niche novels that are hard to find these days.

In other words, I was looking for a job that would balance my interests with a good work-life balance, but what was surprising was that this pipe dream actually came true on paper. Booksellers, like other people in the book trade, have to do physical labor (books are heavy), so when applying for this job, my large frame might have played to my advantage—since I could reach the top shelves close to the ceiling without a ladder, I must have been a godsend for the boss.

This was closer to reality than saying it was my passion that had moved him—but if really true, with my hand and foot broken, I would be of no use in this shop.

Of course, once an employment contract is established, as long as I stubbornly cling on, regardless of my broken bones or the media casting suspicious glances at me, my boss cannot fire me. But I don’t plan on doing that—I don’t want to cause trouble for the workplace I’ve finally entered.

Just nearly dying at the store’s entrance caused enough trouble. Even with all eyes suspecting me, the boss never accepted press interviews. I wished to respond to his attitude with sincerity.

Hence, when we arrived at the mixed-use high-rise three stops away from the hospital, Kyouko-san and I agreed to split up.

She went up to the rooftop first and I headed to the secondhand bookstore: Truth Hall.

“Can you walk on your own?” Kyouko-san expressed concern for me. I had thought it inappropriate to ask her assistance to announce my

resignation—even if the keyword “specializing in the trade of mystery novels” had aroused her curiosity.

“Then let us meet on the rooftop.”

Kyouko-san entered the elevatorless old building. Getting to the rooftop requires some stamina. If she had the energy to support my body all the way, walking up seven flights of stairs should be a piece of cake.

I made it sound grand, but part of me just wanted to get this nuisance over with. I went around to the other side of the building alone and headed to Truth Hall.

At first I thought the owner might not open due to the recent happening, but business seemed to be as usual. If it had been the day of the incident, police might have cordoned off the sidewalk at the scene, but this being a bustling main road, it couldn’t be closed for long.

Well, if that’s the case, then Kyouko-sam should be able to move freely to the rooftop without any hindrance.

I pushed open the manual sliding door of Truth Hall and stepped in.

It seemed business was as usual, and the owner, as he did when I was working here, was standing behind the cash register at the counter with the same stern face, flipping through what looked like used books for sale.

I got on with the resignation quietly. Even though I wasn’t at fault, I did cause trouble for the store in practice. I was prepared to receive his complaints, but those expectations were betrayed.

On the other hand, I had faint hopes—that he might ask me to stay—but this hope too was dashed.

No wonder, I hadn't been at it for long—I mentioned that I would bring back the apron and umbrella another day, but the boss said to consider them parting gifts. Wasn't it too casual as severance pay? Well, at least for mementos.

Leaving a word that I will come again as a customer next time, I didn't stay longer and my broken foot walked me out of the store.

While the shop's name was, according to the boss, not smeared, the turnover had once increased as a result of the report, which made me feel a little better. Who knows, this might be just a kind lie from the hard-to-please boss—or should I say a lame lie.

"I'm glad that something like that happened to us. Because we're a mystery bookstore, you see…"

So that could be thought too.

Not to sound imprudent, I had to admire their unyielding entrepreneurial spirit—from the bottom of my heart, I hope that going forward, Truth Hall will continue to guard the bastion of culture known as mystery literature.

3

In conclusion, as I, now once more having effortlessly slipped back into the realm of the unemployed, lugging my broken right leg up several flights of stairs reached the rooftop. I was aghast to see Kyouko-san straddling a railing, for her skirt was hitched up as she clambered over the handrail. There couldn't be any behavior more ill-bred than this.

Dangerous!

“K-Kyou—!”

I tried to call out unconsciously, but I choked. If my shout startled her there she might really tumble off. Even though the one genuinely petrified was I.

How I wished to dash over without a second thought, harness all my strength, and unceremoniously hoist up Kyouko-san from behind and drag her back to safety. But with a broken leg, I couldn’t dart over, and with a broken hand, I couldn’t hold her.

My recent unemployment only heightened my sense of powerlessness —

By the time these thoughts had run their course, Kyouko-san had crossed the railing, turning to face me.

“Oh, Yakusuke-san, you’re quite the trooper.”

She flicked me a casual greeting.

I didn’t need her greeting; I needed an explanation.

“Have your affairs been settled? Did you quit smoothly?”

“Uh huh, it went fine, very smoothly…”

What a weird exchange.

I mean, who has ever heard of quitting not going smoothly?…Yeah I guess you could.

A job isn’t something you can just quit at your heart’s desire, as I knew all too well first hand.

All things considered quitting was a success this time.

Though battered and bruised, at least I hadn't had any disputes with the boss.

Having explained this, I found myself still trembling, like a detective trying to coax a potential jumper off the ledge.

"So Kyouko-san, what might you be up to this time?"

Kyouko-san stood nonchalantly on the other side of the railing, her footing no wider than the size of her own foot. A slight loss of balance, a gust of wind, and she could crash down.

In doing so, she might be seen as chasing the middle school girl to her death. I, who happened to be present on the scene, might indeed get slapped with suspicion serious enough to warrant the deployment of an investigative unit this time.

Right when my mind was brimming with a foreboding sense of being potentially framed for a great detective's murder, Kyouko-san—oblivious to my concerns—made a tangent.

"Chase, hmm… you could call it being influenced by the narrative nature of it."

It didn't seem that irrelevant actually?

"Whether it's for a reason or not, it appears humans inherently desire an end."

"An end…?"

"Should I call it a suicide wish? No matter adult or child, isn't there a present desire to 'die'?"

“……”

I couldn’t bring myself to agree with her, though psychology does indeed recognize the term 'death instinct,’ which refers to a self-destructive impulse—essentially, a desire to die.

Pessimistic.

Humans are fragile, not knowing for what reason they may lose their lives—this impulse may sometimes become uncontrollable and manifest.

If that were the case, for murderers who claim that their motive for committing grave crimes was to be sentenced to death, the impulse lurking in their hearts may not be dismissible with just a “for no reason”—because it is also one of the “common occurrences” that are annoyingly frequent.

Only calming down and looking closely, I found that Kyouko-san just stepped over the railing, and had not taken off her boots—this alone made it very clear that she (albeit presumptuously) did not mean to follow the middle school girl who had arranged her shoes before jumping.

In other words, this risky act was just part of the detective work—not to follow suit, but to recreate the scene. By actually standing in the same place the middle school girl did, she might discover something, which was Kyouko-san’s usual “try it to know it.”

Be that as it may, it still looked very dangerous—although I breathed a sigh of relief, in order not to startle Kyouko-san, I slowly approached her with my naturally slowed gait due to a broken leg.

“Any new discoveries while I was gone?”

I asked vaguely, and Kyouko-san, hand propped against her cheek,

hummed thoughtfully, a contemplative expression on her face. This gesture was very cute, but I wished she'd keep both hands on the railing.

"Nothing that could be called a discovery at this stage… If I had to force it, there's just one thing I figured out—that Sakasezaka Masaka-chan really wished to die."

"…What do you mean?"

Perhaps because we were alone on the rooftop, Kyouko-san mentioned the girl's name directly—adding 'chan' to it made the situation feel even more stark. It was a vivid reminder that this was real life, not a novel or a TV drama.

Sakasezaka Masaka.

Twelve years old.

This name contained a certain individuality that could not be summed up in a phrase such as "middle school girl."

"It's really something, standing here. You can feel just how tall seven-stories really is. Tumbling from this height, head over heels, would surely end in death."

Anyone could feel that without having to stand here, I thought…

"So, we can probably rule out the possibility that this was a staged performance to vent suicidal tendencies. This could be an essential clue."

"I see."

Not knowing what's so important, I'll nod along for now—asking the wrong thing could cause Kyouko-san to lose her footing. This was not the time to debate.

But with this, I really felt like a detective trying to stop a jumper

"You say falling means certain death, but Kyouko-san, Sakasezaka-chan survived, didn't she?"

"Only because you just happened to be passing under where she fell."

"Could there be a possibility that she staged it from the beginning, meaning to use someone to cushion the fall…?"

"No way! Even softer than asphalt, the human body is not a trampoline.

Even if there was someone to cushion the fall, the chance of death is still high. In fact, Sakasezaka-chan is still in a critical condition, hardly what you'd call 'saved'."

I read too many detective stories and got into the habit of selling the plot.

Well, it was a real miracle that I and she were saved.

To think of it, if I had been even shorter, I might not have had a chance to work at the bookstore, Truth Hall. If that was the case, I would not have met with such an accident on my way back.

So, everything may be more coincidental than a miracle.

Coincidence, but no conclusion.

"Indeed, we can't completely rule out the possibility that she waited for a tall, seemingly sturdy passerby before jumping—but from here,

you can only see the top of people's heads."

Kyouko-san turned around 180 degrees on the narrow space at her feet, and looked down the road again.

"At the height of the seven-story building, it is impossible to see the height of the pedestrians—You are tall enough, but you're skinny."

For a meat cushion, you wouldn't be the best choice—Kyouko-san grasped the handrail with her left hand and tried to push her body out further from the building.

I'm glad you've finally grasped the handrail, but you're not doing gymnastics, so please don't lean your body forward at such a steep angle.

"I'd pick someone meatier if it were me! There's a high chance of failure still, that both of you will die anyway."

"Oh."

…I just threw out a hypothesis to start the conversation. A real scary thought. But this is what detective work is all about, looking at everything from every angle.

"With a meat cushion, twelve-year-old Sakasezaka Masaka might not have given a second thought to anything. Maybe she didn't even think about what would happen to the cushion when she crashed down like that."

This is so stupid that there is no need to discuss it at all.

But we can't rule it out, to say the least.

This is a common mistake of readers of detective stories, who assume

that real-life events and real people do not plan or plot when they commit crimes.

Most of the incidents I have experienced are of no value whatsoever as literature; they are merely the result of a momentary lapse of attention.

From the sound of Kyouko-san's voice, it seems that she is not giving much thought to this possibility.

To be on the safe side, I'll say it.

Why not?

I'm the one who said that there is no possibility of it being staged. But at this point, I can't think of anything that would rule out the possibility. On the contrary, I think it is quite persuasive, and cannot even be sure that it is not true, that a child who read a comic book that glorified suicide and was influenced by it tried to play a "suicide game" and failed, and that the child's antics pulled a pedestrian (me) along.

"No, you see, there are a lot of low-rise six-story and five-story buildings in the neighborhood. If all you want is to play a game, you should jump off those buildings."

Is that how it is?

Of course, not all rooftops are open to the public, but if you want to stage suicide, it's human nature to jump from a lower floor—another strong clue that this may not have been self-staged.

If this view was only accessible by crossing the handrail, then Kyouko-san's on site investigation today indeed had its worth. Ideally I would prefer her to wait until I joined her before crossing the railing. Though for a detective who places the highest value on speed, the concept of

“waiting”

may not even exist…

“Well. It’s time we head to the publishing company.”

Kyouko-san, abandoning her precarious 45-degree angle pose, prepared to cross the railing, meaning to rejoin me. It was really nice of her to retreat when she could have been in big trouble if she had been caught hanging around on the roof of the building. But her movements while crossing the railing were so unsteady it made my heart skip a beat.

Reaching out to her was in danger of pushing her, so I had to content myself with watching. It was not at all a motion suitable while wearing a skirt—and she halted mid-step.

“Yakusuke-san, turn around please.” She adjusted her disheveled long skirt back into place.

“I, I’m sorry.”

“No, thank you.”

I couldn’t just stand and stare.

As the face of Kyouko-san was still graced with a smile, I hastily turned away. My actions, however, were marred by my clumsiness and my frantic pace, resulting in a second’s delay in my turn.

And so—I ended up seeing.

It wasn’t underwear that I saw.

Instead, on the inner side of Kyouko-san’s right thigh, perched on the

railing—precisely where my cast was put on—there was a line of text written in pen, flashing fleetingly before my eyes.

In her own handwriting, it read:

“If it wasn’t suicide?”

4

Being the forgetful detective who almost obsessively avoids leaving records or traces, the one and only exception to Kyouko-san’s memorandum was her own body, which she used like a notebook.

On it she wrote the most basic, unforgettable facts in order to maintain consistency in her memories. Otherwise, if she accidentally dozes off on a train, the moment she wakes up she’ll be struck with a panic, not knowing who or where she is.

Therefore, today, somewhere on her body—possibly the abdomen or arm—should also be written:

“I’m Okitegami Kyouko. Detective. Memory resets every day."

This line tells her who she is.

You could think of it as a means of defense against the villains who try to put her to sleep so that she forgets the content of the investigation. So, in addition to her basic information, she would sometimes jot down clues related to the case on herself.

This time, there should be no forces trying to put Kyouko-san to sleep, but perhaps because she was so tired from supporting me, she felt both fatigued and anxious that she might lose her memory during the

investigation… out of prudence, she would keep a record of the current situation in the case.

Maybe it was when we split up to take action. Like, she had borrowed a pen from someone she met while climbing the stairs. She's a detective in the fast lane—she can move from one clue to another with the speed of light.

I was worried she might have dozed off and forgotten everything we reviewed en route, but it turns out she had already taken preventative measures, how reliable she is, I can only admire her remarkableness once again. To my regret, I could not make any sense of this line, "If it wasn't suicide?"

It was too fragmentary. Nonsense.

Naturally, it had to be in this case. The casebook is self-evident, and recording what is entrusted to her in concrete terms was a big taboo for the forgetful detective. While a password was not necessary, a mnemonic must be kept to a level of key words that will trigger inspiration.

After all, I am not Kyouko-san, hence I can't read the meaning of it.

But the fact she had written that—even if I didn't understand, I could guess.

This lime must be referring to the jumper middle school girl, Sakasezaka-chan—if it wasn't suicide, then what?

If it wasn't suicide? Then an accident… no, that's not it.

She had her shoes lined up and she'd written a will.

It is absurd to think of it as an accident.

At this time, the possibility that she directed and acted out the suicide herself but failed—not an accident, but suicide in the broad sense—should also be considered. In that case, what really happened?

Was Kyouko-san thinking… perhaps, that this was a case of third-party murder?

A murder case. But the girl's shoes were neatly placed on the rooftop, and the suicide note was also written in her own hand…I turned my back on Kyouko-san and tried to clear my head and get my bearings.

No, lining up the shoes neatly could have been done by someone else. But a handwritten will?

I didn't know what it said, but if it was in the girl's own handwriting…

Hmm, wait, if she was made to write it, for example, by force or by some tricky tricks… Since she's a child, she couldn't have done anything else.

In that case, the story of how she was personally moved by Fumoto-sensei's manga to jump would be a cover-up.

That's too perfect—it looks fake.

That's what Kondou-san had said.

Was this his "off" feeling?

"I'm sorry to have kept you waiting."

While I was still caught in the whirlpool of thoughts, Kyouko-san had

already safely climbed over the handrail and pressed her body against my back from behind—it seemed she meant to support me again.

“Please continue leading the way.”

“O-okay…”

I couldn’t ask.

For the record, I was curious about the “if it wasn’t suicide?” line. I also considered asking her whether she had any leads on potential suspects, should it turn out to be a murder case. But such questions remained lodged in my throat—to voice them would be tantamount to admitting that I had caught a glimpse up her skirt.

It wasn’t just giving myself away, but a whole confession wrapped up in a single insinuation.

So until Kyouko-san spoke of it herself, the intention behind that note was beyond my reach.

However—the one thing I could confirm was:

The thoughts of the fastest detective had already gone far, far ahead from mine.

Walking side by side with a distance between the two of us, too great to overcome.

Chapter 4:

Kakushidate Yakusuke Listening

1

Think of the children: this pretext seems to pass easily, and I think the truth of it lies somewhere around what Kyouko-san said. One could argue a decent point of view whenever they want to go against the grain, and those feelings might just be jealousy towards the pure and unblemished innocence from adults who have experienced failure. It is not to be denied, but neither is it to be affirmed.

When it comes to the right to freedom of expression, things get even more complicated. It is easy for parents to say, which is a typical example of an opinion that does not reflect reality, "If you read too much manga, your grades will go down."

Of course, reading manga all day long will not help your grades, but not because manga is bad. You can't read manga and expect to get good grades. You have to make a commitment to study instead of reading manga.

Games and sports are the same, in that, fundamentally, anything that is not studying is a distraction from studying.

On the other hand, if you study too much, you will have no time to play.

Thinking only of your grades means that you will lose your communication skills, to say nothing of the other problems you will encounter, you may even end up committing crimes.

As you must study if you are to read well, so you must read manga if you are to become a manga artist.

2

I’m not saying this to be mean, but the creator of the problematic manga

"Cicerone," Fumoto-sensei, was a totally different person than I thought.

I had heard that he was so depressed by this incident that he wanted to give up his pen, so I imagined him to be a delicate, sensitive, maybe even neurotic man. But in the Sakusousha meeting room, I saw him as a hundred times more capable and reliable than me, and he was well built too.

Far from being delicate, he looked nothing less than hearty at first glance.

Having met Satoi-sensei before, I had the preconception that manga artists, being freelancers, didn’t care about their dress, but perhaps because he was meeting strangers Kyouko-san and me, Fumoto-sensei was dressed smart yet casual; his rich beard seemed not so much grown out as neatly groomed.

“Pleased to meet you. I’m Fumoto Shun, manga artist.”

The way he spoke, the tone of his voice, he really did come across as a very tough guy. But if you judge people by appearance then I, being over 190 centimeters in height, should give you the creeps.

“Pleased to meet you. I’m Okitegami Kyouko, forgetful detective."

Kyouko-san, unlike me, showed no sign of fear as she handed out her business card with a coquettish smile and bowed her white-haired head

respectfully. She then turned to Kondou-san standing next to Fumoto-sensei and introduced herself in an identical manner.

"Pleased to meet you. I'm Okitegami Kyouko, forgetful detective. I appreciate your faith in me. I'll do my utmost best."

On a first formality she scored a hundred percent, aside from the fact that it was their fourth meeting. Naturally, Kondou-san was not surprised at all and he returned a flawless greeting.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Kondou Bunbou, editor-in-chief. Please make yourself at home."

And everyone sat around the long table in the center of the meeting room.

As a guide or as an intermediary, if you think about it, my job was over when I brought the two together, so I did not need to attend this meeting.

To make matters worse, as a stranger I ought to have known better than to miss my chance to leave at this point.

This is a rather sticky problem, not to say a matter of internal office politics, so looking at things from Fumoto-san's place, he might have liked this giant man who came from nowhere to leave the room… I felt a bit guilty about it. Though with my critical fractures I was obviously involved in this incident. I couldn't really call myself an outsider now.

Another way of looking at it is me being an indirect victim of Fumoto-sensei's manga—which was all the more reason to tread carefully so as to not touch on any sore subjects.

As for Kondou-san, he probably just wanted Fumoto to retract his resignation—hope that my presence here won't create unnecessary pressure on him—though it's possible his thinking was the exact opposite and the reason he allowed me to attend is precisely to pressure Fumoto.

He’s that strategic of a man.

Otherwise, he could not have climbed to the position of chief editor so young.

It is naturally possible that he simply enjoyed the idea of coming to work with Kyouko-san… While I was thinking over it, Torimura-san, Kondou-san’s subordinate and Fumoto-sensei’s editor, came in with tea. She put a teacup in front of everyone, and when she took her seat, Kyouko-san immediately got down to business.

“Now, with regard to Kondou-san’s commission, I would like to explain what I consider to be the malaise you feel.”

The fastest detective, as good as her word.

Still, as I had been thinking about this matter since the morning, I felt that it was about time that it was made public. But, just as I held my breath ready for the detective to reveal the answer,

“Hold on, please,”

Fumoto intercepted her—an unthinkable act in mystery novels, breaking off the detective’s speech. But he particularly probably couldn’t stand being left out of the conversation as it moved on without him.

"I don’t know what Kondou-san told you, but I… I think we're good already," he said.

“Mm? You're good already?”

Kyouko-san counter-questioned, seeming to not take offense despite her mystery-solving being cut short—a bit as though playing dumb.

She might have her considerations… like trying to avoid possible complications with him.

"It's just... It might sound like I'm throwing in the towel, but since I'm retiring anyway, there's no need for a detective to work on it," he wanted to say.

"Fumoto-sensei, this matter still…"

Kondou-san was about to offer some consolidation when Fumoto-sensei,

"I understand how unfair this is to you, Kondou-san and Torimura-san, but I think I have to take responsibility. A reader of my manga tried to commit suicide—I can't be at peace with that. I can't just keep drawing manga as if nothing happened."

"....."

He poured out his words like a machine gun. This was not a momentary lapse of emotion, I felt a strong determination. It was something that

someone like me, who lacked resolve most, naturally has no right to speak of, let alone anything to say.

But why though?

His talk of bearing responsibility even came off somewhat irresponsible, and there was a sense of relief in his voice about not being able to continue drawing manga, though it was a bitter decision to make.

"I came here today to give a face to the editorial department that looked after me… Please understand, I have come to a point with manga…"

“Fumoto-sensei!”

This time Kyouko-san interrupted him, the conversation now a battle for dominance.

Her cry had startled him, and he turned to face her.

“I had the chance to read the latest issue of ‘Very Well,’ and it was absolutely wonderful!”

She said it with a smile of pity.

“The theme running through the whole work is really wonderful. The challenge was to depict despair and the future through the medium of teenage comics, and I think it was successful. The content is, of course, excellent, but what impressed me more was the attitude of the author.

Though it is written for children, it is a fiction that adults can enjoy.”

“It, it’s really… thank you.”

He seemed to be taken aback when he was suddenly praised for his work.

He bowed his head in bashful acknowledgement.

Looks like the preview reading paid off…

I’m not sure if I can take Kyouko-san’s sentiments at face value—it was the same with Satoi-sensei, Kyouko-san is ultimately a detective in the service industry, so it goes with the territory that she more or less possesses the worldly wisdom of having to pay a compliment or two in public.

Without accumulating memories, she’s surprisingly worldly-wise.

However, there is no point in pulling a rambling lie here, right. So her feelings about the work should really be positive.

As it turned out, because I ran to the site to search for evidence first, by the time I arrived at the publishing company, it was already very close to the time we had agreed to meet, so I didn't have a chance to look through Fumoto-sensei's works at all, and I was just sitting there.

But it seems Kondou-san's assessment of Fumoto-sensei—very talented, with a bright future ahead of him—was far from exaggerated.

It is for this reason that Kondou-sensei was pulling out all the stops—even hiring a detective—hoping for Fumoto to rescind his retirement, too.

"I'll be very sorry if I don't see a follow-up to the manga, and the children will be disappointed, and some devastated reader will surely go jump off a building again!"

Kyouko-san said those shocking words in the same calm tone she used for her praise, and the strong malice implied in the word "children" hit me like a bolt from the blue. But it was Fumoto-sensei who was most shocked.

"How do you propose to take responsibility for that?"

"T-That is..."

The question, thrown out as if nothing had happened, was full of malice, forcing Fumoto-sensei to cast a plea for help at Kondou-san.

He seemed to want to say, "What's with this person?"

The answer was just two words: forgetful detective. A person who could get on anyone's nerves because she forgets by the next day.

“Well, I wouldn’t say it’s a sure thing,” Kondou-san said with a bitter smile.

As he had entrusted Kyouko-san not for the first time, this kind of conflict was probably within his expectations, and he perhaps enjoyed this sort of bohemian atmosphere even more.

So this man was more tolerant than he seemed.

“It’s just that readers really won’t accept your resignation without a word!

Personally I still hope that you will consider your influence.”

“I am considering my influence…”

Fumoto rallied his spirit to respond.

“I hope you’ll forgive my candor, but I never thought about it when drawing. I should have considered it earlier. It’s my fault for not considering it. I love manga, I’ve read them since I was a kid, and that’s what made me want to become a mangaka, but I really should have been more aware of the impact they have on readers. It was careless of me not to consider.”

He said it so solemnly that I could hardly argue with him. In fact, this was an unavoidable aspect of art.

“Even in baseball there’s risk of getting hit on the head by a pitch,”

Said Kyouko-san from the sidelines.

This time, completely ignoring Fumoto’s promise of reflection.

“Say you believe that 'a sound body produces a sound soul’ and take judo lessons. You may die in an accident during judo practice, or you may be late for class and get run over on your way home from tutoring. The risk of being run over is higher at night. Wherever they are, children are at risk of dying. Manga is not the only thing that has a dangerous impact.”

“…You want me to brush this off, like it’s nothing? A child of twelve jumped off a building because of my work—and you want me to act as if nothing ever happened?”

Positively enraged, Fumoto-sensei leaned aggressively across the long table, posing this question to Kyouko-san. I would have been crushed by this pressure, but it was no wonder that she was still keeping her serene face.

“Since I am not a creator, I cannot provide an apt solution to your problem.

But if I were in your shoes, I would never have done nothing,”

She replied solemnly.

“I would bear this in mind and then apply the experience to my future works.”

“……”

Fumoto-sensei remained silent and still, slowly retracting himself back to his original position, stunned. Kondou-san also appeared shocked by her response, his eyes wide and mouth slightly ajar. Her statement was too bold, and even I as an outsider found it hard to agree with. Nonetheless, how much she really meant what she said was unknown.

It felt as if she deliberately introduced an extreme argument to swiftly terminate the debate. At any rate, the forgetful detective was able to keep the situation under control with this.

“So, Fumoto-sensei, don’t say you don’t want to pursue this any further.

Please listen to what I have to say, listen well and try to comprehend it thoroughly. Now, Kondou-san.” She turned towards him.

"Please show me the contents of the suicide note that the girl left behind.”

3

This is suicide in the name of suicide

Dying for the one I so dearly loved

To fly off is to become an angel.

Please, do not grieve for me

And bless my completion.

Defer this death of mine

To my Cicerone

Fumoto Shun.

4

The police only allowed Kondou-san to see a photocopy of the will, and forbade him to make any further copies or take any photographs, so the above text was written from Kondou-san’s memory, and so it

could not reproduce the original handwriting of the middle school girl —however, the memory of Kondou-san, not being a forgetful detective but a capable editor, can be considered reliable.

Incidentally, the handwriting of the suicide note was judged to be poor in an unbiased assessment, and the illustration said to have been attached at the end quite rough.

Well, to say that a girl's handwriting is beautiful just because she is a girl would be prejudiced—bad handwriting in children is quite normal.

More problematic was the unambiguous mention of “Cicerone” and

“Fumoto Shun”: there seemed to be no hope of different interpretation that could be read into it.

“The text is practically quoted from the manga; she just copied the initial five lines verbatim,”

Said Kyouko-san mysteriously with a nod.

“Honestly, I can’t imagine what kind of character the middle school girl is just by reading this. There’s no individuality coming through.”

Perhaps thinking it inappropriate to mention the name of the jumper girl in front of Fumoto, Kyouko-san refrained as she shared her impressions.

But her blatant omission of the name kind of further erased the girl’s individuality.

“That’s not important at all… What’s important is that a student imitated my manga and wanted to become an angel."

Fumoto-sensei said in self-depreciation.

He probably still hadn't recovered from the bombshell Kyouko-san had dropped—his voice, though faint, still held his point.

"Become… an angel, huh?"

"Yes, Miss Detective, everything you said makes perfect sense. As an artist, if I—but I'm not that great a person. I became a manga artist simply because I can draw and like manga—please don't expect so much of me.

I have no such noble ambition in my heart."

I just do what I want to do, without too much thought behind it—Fumoto-sensei went on, and he was completely indifferent to the meaningful nod from the girl in front of him.

It seemed that he was addressing not only Kyouko-san but Kondou-san and Torimura-san as well.

"You know as well as I do that sometimes the state gets carried away and tries to intervene for censorship purposes, but there are those big names who stand up and speak out for the sake of freedom of speech, aren't there?

Comics are on a plateau, manga culture is declining… things like that. But I don't think every mangaka has such high ideals. I only became a manga artist because I like reading and drawing manga. I don't have the perseverance to keep drawing when people hate me and insult me. I don't think I'm doing anything as grand as promoting culture. If I'm doing it because it's interesting, I should stop when it's no longer interesting. ...Honestly, I don't think regulation is all that bad. It's not as if the manga from the past, when expression was more free, are necessarily more interesting than today's manga. Isn't that just like what the old folks say, that the past was better?"

Hard to argue with that, coming from the mangaka himself. Personally, I felt that Fumoto-sensei was the one who was now in a plateau—even so, my objection was too superficial.

Censorship is not the devil.

That much is certain.

For instance, this whole week I've been portrayed by the media as the villain. Had this happened in a time where there were looser controls, when gossipy TV shows could hang you out to dry like nothing, the harm inflicted upon me would undoubtedly have been much worse—hell, it could've driven me to suicide.

Sure the news was more sensational in those days when human sacrifice, condemning without trial, and digging up the ancestry of the victim were the order of the day, but I do not believe that constitutes the proper approach the media should take in reporting.

Well, this is because I have a disposition of being incriminated, and my slight persecution complex might have something to do with it. The thing is, freedom of the press and freedom of expression can't exactly be discussed with the same logic… But there should be many common points to discuss about the "intention" of creators and journalists.

"Renewed expression fostered through strict regulation, isn't that another truth? The struggle between law and freedom is, in a way, like a tug of war. It would be a mistake to regard creative freedom as a right...however, the fact that I find current manga more interesting than older ones, I believe it's because of the upper hand enjoyed by the latter."

Kyouko-san, however, just shrugged it off. Does she have no empathy, this woman?

"Rest assured, readers don't concern themselves with the morality of authors. Regardless of your character, the motive of your creation, as long as the work is good looking, that's all that matters. Compared to the work being criticized, your character being criticized is simply trivial."

"....."

“Alright, whether Fumoto-sensei should seal the brush or not, leave that for later—could you let me do serious things first?"

Fumoto-sensei nodded reluctantly. Um, the same goes for her: "Doesn't matter her character, just that she's a detective."

If she could read anything else from the tiresome puzzle of this will, then Fumoto would have no reason to seal the brush.

"Kondou-san, you came to our agency because something about the will isn't sitting right with you. Can you elaborate on that feeling of malaise?"

This time Kyouko-san asked politely for permission. Kondou-san of course nodded.

"Thank you for your cooperation.”

Despite the importance of this meeting, neither Kyouko-san nor Kondou-san wanted to waste too much time. After exchanging views here, Kyouko-san would have investigations to carry on with.

Deadline: 10 o'clock tonight.

We had nine hours left.

"In conclusion, the female middle school student who jumped to her death leaving behind a suicide note…"

Kyouko-san paused mid-sentence and thought for a moment. "That's too long, let me abbreviate a little."

I'm guessing, just as she had rebranded me from "Kakushidate-san" to

"Yakusuke-san," she wanted a name that was shorter and easier to say.

Even if we were to withhold the name the whole mouthful of "female middle school student who jumped to her death leaving behind a suicide note" was far too time-consuming considering our deadline.

"The girl with the suicide note... nay, the testament girl."

Kyouko-san's shorthand name for Sakasezaka Masaaka. Quite concise.

And what a pleasant phonetic rhythm it had.

A certain personality had emerged as a result of that nickname—but then, a nickname is just a nickname, so we must be careful not to impose our preconceptions.

While I was considering this thing,

"There is absolutely no connection between the motive of the testament girl as we've come to call her, and Fumoto-sensei's Cicerone."

Kyouko-san declared as though stating a simple fact.

Usually she broke down the possibilities one by one and reasoned out, with "I think ...", "It seems to me ...", "It appears to me..." it was rare for her to leave no room for other considerations.

"Please don't make up such things, Okitegami-san. You must be trying to console me..."

Fumoto-sensei, made even more anxious by her conclusive tone, stood up in annoyance to say so. His manner even conveyed anger, like he didn't want to hear such lip service.

Indeed, after reading the will left behind by the girl, coming up with a deduction like this was simply too preposterous.

"Do you have any grounds for that?" Kondou-san calmed Fumoto-sensei and had him sit back down, while looking at Kyouko-san.

Kyouko-san's conclusion was the one he had been looking for, but cautious as he was, he was not about to accept this conclusion so easily.

As for me, always suspected from a young age and extremely warped in personality, I could relatively better understand Kyouko-san's meaning here.

"Even without grounds, I wouldn't take the suicide note at face value.

After seeing the contents you conveyed, there are two possibilities. 1. The contents of the will are true. 2. The contents of the will are false."

The overdue rebuttals—Kyouko-san began to categorize them.

1. The contents are true—2. The contents are false?

False?

"...Kyouko-san, I understand ①, but what does 'wrong' mean in ②?"

"It means, just because it's written in the will 'To Fumoto Shun,' doesn't mean it was intended for him, you see."

"Er… So what does that mean?"

Her meaning was plain enough, but clearly it was a viewpoint that Kondou-san could never have conceived—he's very naive in this regard.

"That would be a cinch to write, since it's just a copy of the text of the piece."

"A cinch."

Right, for this no literary talent or ideology is required.

Anyone can copy writing. I could do it even if I had no suicidal tendencies.

Even if I hadn't met Fumoto-sensei, even if I never saw a single panel of his manga, I could still write 'To Fumoto Shun.'

"So you mean to say—the text was fabricated... the testament girl lied?"

"For that, further categorization is necessary. That is, within '2. The contents of the will are false' are two cases. I. The testament girl actually thought this way. II. The testament girl lied."

"What other way could she have thought?"

"She may have attempted suicide for another reason but deluded herself to believe otherwise."

"It seems not much different from 1..."

"No, it's very much different. Just because the victim believes someone is the culprit, it doesn't necessarily mean they are, right? A dying message left by a murdered person doesn't always tell the truth."

Even using a detective novel as an example, Fumoto still didn't quite grasp it, just standing there with his head hung down. Seeing this and perhaps feeling her explanation wasn't clear enough, Kyouko-san added this.

"Look, even if a person annoying others doesn't think it's bullying, if the other person feels they are being bullied, then it is actually considered bullying, right? This is a correct way of looking at things, but if I may allow myself to be a bit cynical, it also harbors a certain danger. A system that accepts the victim's words unconditionally and without limit can potentially become a breeding ground for false accusations."

Being prone to false accusations, this truth was all too familiar to me.

In the case at hand, even I felt it would be completely out of line to harbor any doubt about the content of the suicide note left by the twelve-year-old girl who is currently in the hospital hovering between life and death. She must be already worn out and worn down, and to suspect her of being such a thing. On reflection though, the question of whether her life was in danger or not is pretty independent of the credibility of the will.

Mistakes happen—and so do lies.

"Therefore, every effort should be made to examine the contents of the will she left behind. To check the truth of it."

"I understand the gist with the first one."

Kondou-san had the look of one who dreaded seeing the terrible truth that he had never dreamed of.

"So you mean the girl might think she's imitating my manga, but unconsciously there might be another reason, a true reason... Is that what you're saying?"

"Mmhmm..."

She smiled an ambiguous smile.

It was likely to be a little different—still within the margin of error, so she'd rather not hear it; perhaps in order to move conversation along without saying anything in particular.

"It's like someone is being bullied and yet the school claims they can't be certain bullying is the cause of the suicide. What a disturbing thing..."

Said Fumoto-sensei, speaking out his own opinion while failing to notice Kyouko-san's reaction.

"But what about case B? That's the one I really don't understand."

He asked Kyouko-san so.

"She lied? Is there even a reason to writing lies in a will?"

Fumoto-sensei, who had become a manga artist because he wanted to do what he loved—claiming he would stop drawing manga the moment it stopped being fun—seemed, in a sense, a purehearted man.

Even if my thoughts hadn't reached that far, once it was laid out for me, even someone like me could see it was a straightforward case of categorization.

"Yes, of course, there is a reason—and that reason can be divided into two as well."

"Two again?"

"It could be divided into about twenty really, but for simplicity's sake we only do two."

Kyouko-san said, half seriously and half in jest, before continuing,

"α. The testament girl harbors malice toward Fumoto-sensei. β. The testament girl does not harbor malice toward Fumoto-sensei."

Now it was alpha and beta.

"Malice...toward me?"

"Because if a suicide victim names you in their will, wouldn't you be troubled? In fact, you're talking about retirement—I should mention, for reference, that among the omitted case divisions, there was also a scenario involving malice towards the publishing company,"

As Kyouko-san summarized that part, Kondou-san quietly covered his mouth—probably weighing the validity of what Kyouko-san had said.

"She…she wanted to make trouble? No, but, the girl threw herself off a building, didn't she? What, harassing me was worth dying for?"

"Whether she wanted to harass you to the point of death, or whether she was harassing you in the process, that would require a separate classification—"

At this point I finally understood why Kyouko-san had to be at the scene to determine whether it was self-staged, she was not just verifying a

'suicide game' but also whether this was a simulated suicide out of spite.

But the results seemed to have ruled out this possibility... I should have already accustomed to the theories that Kyouko-san meticulously debunked one after another, but I was getting pretty confused now.

"In the case of α where there is malice, there are two patterns to

consider."

Kyouko-san continued to break it down.

"ι. The testament girl bears a grudge against Fumoto-sensei. κ. The testament girl does not bear a grudge against Fumoto-sensei."

So it's come to patterns ι and κ...

I'm worried that she might run out of symbols first.

"A grudge? Against Fumoto-sensei?"

When Kondou-san made a doubtful face,

"Yes, that includes irrational hatred,"

Kyouko-san said.

"That is, the testament girl felt that Fumoto-sensei did something to her and wanted to get even—to vent her anger by leaving such a will."

"I see…What is that 'something' then?"

"There are countless answers to that. So many that even I can't predict them all. Fumoto-sensei, I hope you can tell me, do you personally know the testament girl?"

"I've never met her!"

He denied the sudden question hastily.

Denied too hastily, and only made it all the look suspicious. But well,

if you were suspected of that, would you not be nervous whether it was true or not?

"I see. Well, let's just explain case κ then. κ: The testament girl doesn't hate you. In brief, because you are a celebrity, you are an object of envy."

Malice because of fandom.

What the...? ... As I followed the breakdown of choices available to Kyouko-san, I got the impression that the line in the will, "To Fumoto Shun" had been flipped 180 degrees.

We wanted to conclude that the twelve-year-old did not attempt suicide because of Fumoto-sensei's work, but the discussion went in a direction that was no better.

"What celebrity... I'm just a nobody..."

Said Fumoto-sensei with a hint of humility, but he didn't push the point, since that possibility was easier to accept than a 12-year-old having a grudge against him.

It is inconceivable that a manga artist who has built up a certain amount of seniority would have never paid the cynosure tax.

"A. The testament girl is Fumoto-sensei's fan. B. The testament girl is not Fumoto-sensei's fan. Dismissing personal grudges, both possibilities are open."

Kyouko-san advanced the discussion. With these A and B, the whole thing became like a multiple-choice test question.

That set of choices was the question to me.

There couldn't have been any such strong animosity on the part of the fans—so I thought, but the fact that they didn't even question the implication made it clear that neither Kondou-san nor Fumoto-sensei were in any way suspicious.

The hatred only a fan could harbor.Might not be so uncommon in the manga world.

Kondou-san, looking uneasy, urged Kyouko-san to go ahead.

"Yes, I understand now the malice. Well Okitegami-san, if she had no ill-will toward me,... could you explain the second scenario again from the beginning?

This could be construed as him trying to stop the endless branching of choices that she had been proposing.

"Without any malice towards Fumoto-sensei, is it really possible for someone to do such a thing? This seems like she was purely out to make trouble."

"The motives are different. Umm, should I say motives or objectives... In scenario α, the girl's gaze was fixed on Fumoto-sensei from beginning to end. In scenario β, the aim was to divert everyone else's attention towards Fumoto-sensei."

"……?"

"She wrote a fake suicide note blaming you for her death to cover up the real reason."

What is written in the will is not necessarily true. And if the person themselves didn't want to write the truth, then what?

The girl who left the will meant no harm to Fumoto-sensei—to put it more bluntly, she meant to say, 'any other manga artist would have

done just as well'.

Initially the worst-case seemed to be 'malicious fan deliberately setting up Fumoto-sensei', but this 'anyone would do' without any malice was also pretty terrible. A lack of malice made it worse. That's a real downer.

"'Suicide because of manga'—is it easy to understand? Or a clear-cut example, or an easily accepted cause-and-effect relationship—it's a motive that makes it hard to delve deeper into."

Well, I'll be damned—once I had heard that, I did let go of any other possibilities.

Most people would find themselves thinking they shouldn't doubt the contents of a suicide note before they even read it, and the "influenced by manga" story was certainly persuasive, for better or worse.

The possibility that this story itself was fabricated.

That it was not malice, it was contrivance.

"It is difficult to see through a lie when it is all a matter of the heart..."

Said Kondou-san with a sigh.

The testament coming from the person themselves made it even more difficult to clear any false accusations—even if we wanted to grill the girl for the truth, she was now in a coma. God hope not, but if she died now, the truth would be buried forever.

"Okitegami-san…then what would be the real motive for her suicide? The true reason she lied and tried so hard to cover it up."

"I'm not sure."

Given the intricacy of the case division, it was an elusive answer, but well, that would be the case—it's hidden because she wanted to hide it.

"Family problems, school difficulties, social relations ... these are probably the common reasons why children attempt suicide, and even this feels like a generally acceptable narrative."

In principle, everything is a hypothesis at this stage, and it is not yet clear whether case β is the correct answer. If case I in the initial classification were the correct answer, then the current classification would be a waste of time.

Since Kyouko-san had been talking about the possibility of almost everything up to this point, it seems that the premise of the testament girl being unrelated to Fumoto-sensei is that there is no evidence to support this "conclusion" from the beginning.

Fumoto-sensei seemed to notice that as well and said, while shaking his head,

"There are as many possibilities as you want there to be. Enough, Miss detective, you need not comfort me anymore."

"It would not be my responsibility if that were the case—rather, I would be the victim. It's nothing but a cop-out, and there is no evidence whatsoever to support it."

“Neither is there any evidence proving that you are to be culpable."

"That's why I call it a cop-out. The only facts we know for certain at this point are that the child attempted suicide and that my name was written in the child's suicide note, that's it."

He wasn't wrong.

Without even the benefit of a Sherlock Holmes or a Gordian knot on my side, listening to the whole thing from the next seat, I felt like Kyokuo-san was overcomplicating the fragments, as though just trying to get Fumoto-sensei to withdraw his decision to stop writing in order to show off her theory.

But whatever you may say, Kyouko-san is a detective. At the outset, in the hospital ward, she said to me what she had said to the client—that she would not distort or falsify the facts in order to arrive at the desired result.

She may offer praise, but she will not provide empty words of comfort or condolence.

"There's one more hard fact."

Kyouko-san said coolly, holding her finger aloft.

"And it is the true nature of the malaise you felt, Kondou-san."

"What is it? This other hard fact."

Asked Fumoto-sensei, somewhat impatiently.

It seemed that he had reached his limit of patience, and whether he would leave the conference room in anger depended on Kyouko-san's answer.

With her unconventional way of presenting arguments, Kyouko-san could unintentionally lead people off-track. Fumoto-sensei's frustration with this is a natural result. He may feel as though she had been purposely dancing around the topic, deftly evading the crux of the matter.

But the "hard fact" that she revealed, in fact only added fuel to the flames.

She began, first laying a cryptic hint, "I can only praise your current

serial.

Please keep that in mind, and patiently listen to what I have to say." the she revealed the 'hard fact'.

"I have read Cicerone, naturally,"

She said.

"And it isn’t that interesting and lacks absolutely all impact to compel a reader to suicide."

5

Here's the thing.

While it was supposed to be an exhaustive enumeration of cases, the chance that the testament girl did not commit suicide actually never made it to the surface of our discussion.

Chapter 5:

Kakushidate Yakusuke Waiting

1

Declaring, even with relative politeness, a piece of work as "not that interesting" can be interpreted as a strikingly honest, no holds barred critique, particularly when paired with the assertive wording, "lacks absolutely all impact." This serves as an undisputed critique. No room for interpretation. Absolute hard fact.

No, if that were the truth that's bothering Kondou-san it'd be obvious and there'd be no need to dig any deeper—it would also explain why such an astute person as Kondou-san couldn't put his finger on this malaise.

It's actually Kondou-san's responsibility as an editor to judge whether a manga is good or not, but you can't just tell a distressed mangaka that his work sucks and doesn't move the readers.

To elaborate, it wasn't the currently serialized and editorially promoted

"Very Well," but the title of a past one-shot, "Cicerone," that was mentioned in the suicide note, that Kondou-san might have perceived as deliberate.

Ordinarily, one would interpret it as showing that the fan was dedicated enough to be familiar with past works. Yet, that fact could also be seen in another light—perhaps any manga dealing with the theme of suicide was selected as a pretext for the suicide, just for choice's sake.

Such impromptu choice; if that was really the case, there could be no act more deliberate.

No wonder it felt suspiciously perfect.

However an editor and a part of the organization, Kondou-san wouldn't dare voice these thoughts to Fumoto-sensei—but Kyouko-san would.

The type of woman who speaks her mind because she knows she will forget—and a detective.

Kyouko-san, who articulated the vague discomfort Kondou-san felt so frankly, almost very brazenly. As a detective, she has no doubt fulfilled her client's expectations.

Still, this is only an interim report—Kyouko-san's detective work is just about to kick off its second half.

2

"Whoopsie, we got scolded."

With an inexplicably cheerful demeanor, Kyouko-san spoke as if she was enjoying the situation, almost giddy.

"I didn't expect him to get so angry ... Ah haha. I had a faint hope that manga artists would humbly accept criticism."

That was a pipe dream.

Especially since "Very Well" had been praised so highly, even if it included mere pleasantries, the contrast was stark.

Rather, it was precisely because of that remembrance that Fumoto-sensei's rage knew no bounds—Kyouko-san and I were practically

forced out of the meeting room, bringing the gathering at Sakusousha to a somewhat coercive end.

Halfway through I thought Fumoto-sensei would storm out, but no, we were the ones ejected… We flounderingly escaped, jumped on the bus that was conveniently parked in front of the company building—the fastest detective had the quickest escape.

On the other hand, there I was, embarrassingly enough, thoroughly ragged as she hauled me onto the bus.

Even though, now that I think I did my best to be as inconspicuous as possible during the meeting, and I wonder why they threw me out.

I've been made an accomplice.

How unfair, my lord.

As it stands, compared to staying in the conference room with an irate Fumoto-sensei, it feels great to sit side by side on a bus with the inexplicably excited and utterly jubilant Kyouko-san, who appeared to revel in our grand escape.

Though I felt terribly sorry for Kondou-san and Torimura-san whom we had left behind...

"I'm so sorry,"

Kyouko-san finally said, calming down a bit, to me—I thought it was an apology for angering Fumoto-sensei, but:

"I apologize for giving you a preconception before you had the chance to read it yourself, after having you wait until the afternoon."

And so she continued.

It seemed that Kyouko-san was apologizing for having shared her thoughts on the one-shot manga "Cicerone" before I had the chance to read it—despite her unabashed critique of it in front of Fumoto-sensei, there she is apologizing.

It must be her stance as a book reader, but it seems that aficionados of mystery novels tend to overreact to spoilers.

Well, there's no need for her to apologize to me. "Cicerone" or "Very Well," I've completely missed my chance to read them both, and except for this occasion, it's unlikely that I'll ever pick them up in the future, so it's really fine by me.

"No, no, please do read it and let me hear your thoughts. I found the work to be utterly uninspiring, failing to stir anything in me, but there's a chance you might discover some appeal in it," she insisted.

A chance, is there?

Just how low is her opinion of it... Now I want to read it even less.

"Everyone judges a story, any story, not just manga, according to his own taste. "Cicerone" is not my cup of tea, but it might be a soul-shaking masterpiece to the twelve-year-old testament girl."

"....."

That is—well, a possibility indeed.

She said nothing in the meeting, but (she was thrown out before she could say anything) the chance that its glorification of suicide just happened to resonate with the testament girl was really there.

It may not resonate with anyone else, but there are works that I believe to be masterpieces—no one can definitively say that "Cicerone" wasn't such for the testament girl.

"That's just the point. Even if you think the author is rubbish, you should give him the benefit of the doubt. In my view, that is what applies."

"So ... the investigation continues?"

That's how it goes.

Even while being chased by Fumoto-sensei, before leaving the conference room, Kyouko-san had firmly made such an arrangement with Kondou-san.

"So, I'm going to continue investigating the real reason behind her suicide attempt. I'll be back to intrude on you around ten p.m."

Intrusion indeed, a veritable intrusion...

As for where we are heading: it's not just the school the girl went to, not simply hopping on a random bus to get away from the publishing company we were at.

I had heard that was the plan after the meeting at Sakusousha, so I had already looked up the bus connections on my phone— this had us appear competent during our escape.

It was a tight schedule, befitting the fastest detective, but since the meeting at Sakusousha ended earlier than expected, we gained a bit of extra time.

"But is it okay, Kyouko-san?"

"Is it okay? Meaning what?"

"Uh, you were reporting your findings from this morning, but you never asked Kondou-san or Fumoto-sensei any questions... Will this hinder investigations?"

"Oh, you don't have to worry about that one bit."

Dismissing my concerns as needless worry, Kyouko-san grinned mischievously.

"I got to ask what I wanted to know—at the very least, I wanted to confirm whether the sense of discomfort I felt was the same as what Kondou-san felt, and whether there was any connection between Fumoto-sensei and the testament girl."

That I managed to do, said Kyouko-san—hmm, I understood the first point, but not the second one?

A connection?

"Yes. Specifically, regarding the mention of "Cicerone" in the suicide note, I wanted to check whether there was any reality to the case that there was malice and resentment involved. There was a hypothesis that the testament girl, having met Fumoto-sensei as a fan at a signing event, held a grudge for being treated coldly and committed suicide as a kind of

spite—but from the reaction of Fumoto-sensei, it seems that wasn't the case."

"Yeah... He did say he didn't know her."

Without knowing it, I might have encountered someone and, without knowing it, been resented. The possibility that I am hated without my knowledge cannot yet be completely ruled out, so it is difficult to completely deny that case. However, if it were that kind of grudge, it

seems unlikely that it would suddenly lead to a suicide commotion without any warning signs leading up to it. Therefore, it is unnatural that Fumoto-sensei has no recollection of such a thing.

...If the goal was to trap Fumoto-sensei, then by me getting involved at the point of fall, that goal was not achieved.

In the media, even though my name was omitted, for some strange and mysterious reason I was treated as the culprit, and since the content of the suicide note, which included the name of Fumoto-sensei's work, has not been made public—when I think about it, it makes me feel somewhat mixed about it.

"So, Kyouko-san, do you currently think that Fumoto-sensei was just being used?"

"I don't have any thoughts at this time. I am simply quietly collecting material for deduction."

I was brushed off like that, but I wonder, might she have some hypotheses she's holding onto?

There is the matter of the note on the inner thigh of the right leg... too bad I can't pursue that.

"Ahh, but I think it was good, in the end, that Fumoto-sensei was so angry.

If he gets angry about his work being belittled, it means he hasn't lost the soul of a creator."

This is completely opposite to what you just said...

Even without an artist's deposition, I think anyone would get angry if they were spoken to like that.

"...Good or bad aside, he was someone who didn't put on airs,"

I said. Though frankly, I also had the feeling that it might have been better if he had put on some airs.

Well, if that's dismissed by saying, "You're just holding onto a preconception of the author," then that's how it is, but.

"Well, I wasn't saying this because I was scolded so fiercely, but I thought you might be more downcast. But, somehow..."

"Did he seem somewhat relieved to you?" Kyouko-san pinpointed exactly what I had been hesitating to say—does that mean she might have had a similar impression?

"Yes... that's right."

"Well, being a manga artist is a tough job. Even if they say they do it because it's interesting, there must have been some inherent difficulties.

It's a love-hate kind of thing—and once you've built up a certain amount of experience, it's not something you can just quit at will. you can't just retire, especially when the editorial department is pushing for you. This turn of events might be a dilemma for Fumoto-sensei, but it could also be a happy surprise, an unexpected opportunity for freedom."

"Hmm..."

Personally, having quit jobs more times than I can count at twenty-five, I found it a bit hard to comprehend that feeling—just maybe, in the world of writing, where there's no clear "quitting," chances to retire might indeed be hard to come by.

Is she suggesting that Fumoto-sensei saw the attempted suicide of the testament girl as an opportune excuse to retire?

"No, I won't go that far. It's true that he felt responsible. But when you think that the work you put so much effort into could take someone's life, it would become difficult to maintain motivation."

"....."

It wasn't simply because it became tiring or boring that he pulled away—

the situation wasn't as straightforward as he tried to make it sound.

Only the person themselves can understand their feelings, and to go further, there's a chance that even they don't fully understand— according

to Kyouko-san's categorization, the pattern where the person is merely convinced might seem unusual but isn't so rare after all.

"Well, I stirred up so much anger, I can only hope that it turns into motivation for him."

"...Could it be, Kyouko-san, that you intentionally chose sharp words as a tactic?"

Only now did this possibility occur to me— well, regardless of the past one-shot story, Kyouko-san had highly appraised his ongoing series.

Perhaps as a reader, not a detective, she wanted to continue reading the series—just as I was about to think that, it seemed I was overthinking, for she said,

"No, well—"

And Kyouko-san squinted her eyes behind her glasses.

“There’s no such thing as ‘continuing’—by tomorrow, I’ll have forgotten everything I read today, you know?”

3

Kyouko-san’s comment earlier that if a reader commits suicide because of a manga, the experience should be utilized in the following work, was in that sense, utterly thoughtless— demanding others to achieve what she herself could not manage.

No matter whom she annoyed or what grudges she incurred, Kyouko-san, who would forget them all by the day’s end, had neither accumulating experiences nor a growing achievements.

In the extreme case, even if there was a detective's blunder in the solution phase where the culprit commits suicide—a mistake a detective should never allow—the forgetful detective could not carry over the memory of such a disgrace to the following day.

That she can be so dispassionately criticize, perhaps it was precisely because of her standpoint—reckless or even irresponsible, one might say.

But this also inevitably leads to a lack of persuasiveness when it matters most.

Kyouko-san’s unique attribute of daily memory reset, while allowing her to strictly comply with her confidentiality obligations, and giving her an enormous advantage as a detective, at the same time, greatly limits her investigations.

It’s not just that any case must be solved within a day—it’s also that most culprits, when pointed out by a detective who does not drag the

past with her, would want to say, “what do you know?”

Even more than a detective who starts lecturing the culprit in the resolution phase, they would be far less willing to accept—no matter how eloquently they unravel their motives, it’s meaningless against the forgetful detective. No matter what past the culprit has or what thoughts led to the crime, it will not get through to the forgetful detective.

We haven't gained the rationale behind the testament girl's intentions still— neither has she regained consciousness, but when she wakes up, what will she say to Kyouko-san?

Whatever she says.

It will be forgotten tomorrow, anyway.

4

We alighted from the bus to reach our destination: a nationwide renowned, prestigious private all-girls middle school— I beg your pardon for withholding the school name.

The testament girl had started attending classes here this spring, and given that it's an elite school, she must at least have good grades.

The typical image of a child who forsakes their student duties to read only manga and is negatively influenced by them is greatly at odds here.

Whether she was an honor student who balanced her hobbies and studies, or perhaps, an honor student who doesn’t indulge in comics.

If it’s the latter, it proves that this whole deal with Fumoto-sensei was

just an excuse. Kyouko-san is on a mission today to find answers to this question.

“So then... um, Yakusuke-san, could you wait here for me? There seems to be a bench over there, you can sit and wait.”

Kyouko-san stopped at a small park midway from the bus stop to the school gate and moved away from me.

Well of course I couldn't just go in a girls' school.

It'd be bad enough under normal circumstances, and especially now that the school must be on edge since a student attempted suicide there—you would be arrested without even having to commit a crime.

That definitely went for me, and honestly, even for Kyouko-san, it’s a risky endeavor. At the very least, if she honestly declared herself a detective, she wouldn’t get permission to enter, and she would undoubtedly be turned away at the gate.

“Yes. That’s why I’ll probably introduce myself as the testament girl's relative and ask around in the class and the staff room."

Kyouko-san said without batting an eyelid.

To think of talking not only to students but also to teachers, one has to admire her audacity.

Undercover investigations involving assuming a false identity might be part and parcel for a detective, but... considering it's a school, it does begin to make one a bit anxious.

A school feels much more like a sacred space than just any company—

especially a private girls' middle school, which would surely have security guards stationed around.

The great cause of protecting children is indeed powerful—more so, in this case, where if something were to happen to a child entrusted to them by their parents, it could affect the very survival of the school corporation.

In fact, the case of an attempted suicide, albeit off-campus, is very damaging to the school... Hm? What was that, I feel like I was on the verge of remembering something... or is it just my imagination?

“I'll be back soon. If I am not back in an hour, come to rescue me.”

"Rescue you?"

"Just kidding. There's no need for you to come. Just tell Kondou-san that the mission was a failure."

Having said that, Kyouko-san left me at the bench in the park, walking briskly towards the school.

Even if one has to assume a false identity, if claiming to be an insider, there's no need for a disguise... Inside the school, her white hair will certainly stand out, but that could also serve as a conversation starter with the naturally curious middle school girls.

Either way, I have no role to play in this round—I might as well take a proper break for an hour. After all, I'm still convalescing, or rather, I've only just regained consciousness.

Taking a rest when you can is also part of the job.

...Not that I'm getting a daily allowance from Kyouko-san or Kondou-san for this matter.

Given Kyouko-san's keen sense of money, it's unlikely she would offer me an assistant's fee, and I can't exactly ask Kondou-san, who I owe a

great debt to, for a referral fee—meanwhile, since I've already announced my resignation at work, I'm left wondering what on earth I'm doing.

I joked to Kondou-san about becoming a writer, but seeing the current situation of Fumoto-sensei, I am reminded that it's not an easy world —

besides, the records of cases like the one I'm writing about now, even if they are based on real experiences, are hardly the sort that can be published.

They could be subject to regulation and lead to a publishing ban—or worse, the author, me, could be arrested.

Not an exaggeration.

The scariest part about regulation of expression is, indeed, that it can cause creators to shrink back, but even more dangerous is the possibility that creators end up being arrested. Human rights are infringed upon in the name of protecting human rights.

While this is ultimately possible, carrying it out on the whim of emotions is too risky for maintaining social order, and is even decadent.

Decadent as it may be, as Kyouko-san also said, in history, there were longer periods when such regimes were the norm, and even in modern times, on a global scale, freedom of expression is not a given right.

...On the other hand, the difficult part is that we cannot dismiss the possibility that a single book could disrupt social order as absurd.

Books that have transformed readers' consciousness and even led to revolutions that overturned oppressive regimes are not fiction—

ideological works disguised as entertainment have provoked unseeable massacres, and fueled discrimination and prejudice.

In such a case, the framework of "protecting children" is insufficient—it's even a mistake to discuss it in the same framework, but still, at its root, it's the same issue.

The root is the same, and that's why it's so deep-seated.

...Well, Fumoto-sensei might be demoralized, and maybe it's also an excuse to escape the harsh profession of being a manga artist, but still, hearing that a child nearly lost her life because of his work, he chooses to shoulder the blame without resorting to the cliché of "It's not my concern, it's the parents' responsibility."

Perhaps from Kyouko-san's perspective, it's just a way to avoid difficult discussions by admitting one's own fault—but that could be seen as no different from unilaterally shifting the blame onto someone else.

As she once said to me.

I'll never forget, it was also the "first time" for me—a case that was also the first for the forgetful detective.

Yes, it was two years ago from now...

Inadvertently, just as I was about to delve into reminiscence on a park bench, my cell phone rang—it was from Kondou-san.

I wondered if he had finally cleaned up the meeting room I ran away from—I mean, I really did—, and well, the timing was just right, so I answered the call.

"Hello, Kondou-san."

"Don't 'hello' me, jeez. What the heck have you done, Yakusuke."

That's how Kondou-san started the conversation, pretending to be angry—

but I could sense an unmistakable air of relief that he couldn't quite hide.

Aside from feeling refreshed from having Kyouko-san pinpoint the unease he had been feeling, there's also the relief that comes from her saying almost everything that, as an editor and as a member of the organization, he couldn't say to the authors he handled—it's something that, of course, he'd never admit out loud.

"I haven't done anything! Please don't accuse me."

"What are you talking about? It's your job to rein in Okitegami-san."

That was news to me.

I had always thought that being helped, or rather, being tossed around, was my role.

"Has Fumoto-sensei calmed down?"

"Yeah, finally—he said he's going to work and went home."

"Work? So, the retirement announcement—"

"No, it's not that he's retracted it. Just that retirement is postponed until the truth comes out—that's the situation. For now, until ten o'clock tonight, Fumoto-sensei is a manga artist."

"I see..."

It seemed to be going just as Kyouko-san had intended—not a situation to rejoice about with abandon, but the circumstances had improved, if only slightly.

Yet, if things stayed as they are, it would just mean a few more hours of delay had been created—digging up the true cause behind the death of the testament girl, the reasons for her suicide, how much could I uncover about such deeply personal matters in just a few hours—it's hard to say.

It may all end up being a false hope.

"So, that's how it is on my end—but Yakusuke, what are you up to now?

Isn't Okitegami-san with you?"

"Ah, we're acting separately right now—"

I explained the current situation to Kondou-san.

Even though I said we were acting separately, I was actually just resting on a bench, and I might get scolded for abandoning my role to stop

Kyouko-san's rampage, but I couldn't lie to Kondou-san who was both a benefactor and a friend.

"—So that's the situation, Kyouko-san is currently investigating the school alone. She's looking into things like classroom relationships, seeing if there were any troubles there—"

"...She's really hands-on, isn't she?"

Kondou-san laughed in astonishment.

I get it. Hearing that a moment ago the woman sitting in the corporate office was now infiltrating a girls' school for undercover investigation, there's nothing to do but laugh.

"But, the reason for the suicide might not be in school, right? There might have been problems at home—"

"Yeah, that's why once the school investigation is over, the plan is to head to her home and the hospital where the testament girl was being treated.

Both prospects are slim though—"

Hard to imagine the family would want to meet with a detective out of nowhere, and there's no way to question a comatose girl in the hospital.

Even so, Kyouko-san would choose to keep taking action perhaps thinking that new ideas might come while she's on the move.

"I see—well, that's all we can do. Us powerless ones can only pray for the best by tonight... But still, we're talking about the suicide motive of a

twelve-year-old. Even if Fumoto-sensei's manga is proven unrelated, it's hard to call that a good result."

Kondou-san muttered with his voice turned to a darker tone—and I agreed.

A happy ending was too much to hope for.

The only consolation, then, might be for Fumoto-sensei to grow through this as a person.

Chapter 6:

Kakushidate Yakusuke Confronting

1

"Yakusuke-san, my apologies for the delay."

As promised, exactly one hour later, Kyouko-san returned to the park from the girls' middle school, dressed, for some reason, in a pitch-black sailor uniform.

What happened?

"Please, don't ask,"

Kyouko-san said with a heavy voice.

Her tone was as if she was on the second day of staying up all night...

Without needing to be told not to ask, I couldn't ask anyway; Kyouko-san was wrapped in a dangerous aura, along with the sailor uniform.

No, Kyouko-san was petite, and her presence could be said to suit her —

if one could say so. The whiteness of her hair and the darkness of the long sailor uniform created a stark contrast that seemed to draw one in. Since her boots remained her original, adult-like ones, if one didn't know she had come from a middle school, they might think it was a fashion concept based on such imbalance.

It suits you well— Blurt this out and I would probably be slapped. As I stood, unable to do anything else but remain silent,

"I was toyed with by middle school girls,"

Kyouko-san said, shaking her head from side to side—she gave me the background I hadn't asked for, which she probably did because she didn't want me to think she was wearing it out of preference.

"It's okay. It's not as bad as what happened to Higami-san."

"Who's that..."

I received a sharp glare.

It was misdirected anger, but I suppose she had every right to be angry—

especially since a detective who had gone undercover without a disguise had returned in one, a situation that confused even me.

"It's fine. I'll forget all about it by tomorrow."

I'm not likely to forget.

"Let's head to our next destination, Yakusuke-san. Next is the home of the testament girl."

Kyouko-san took my hand, urging me to stand from the park bench.

I could tell she was in a hurry, but it seemed like it was more than just part of her fastest-detective work.

Despite her delicate arm, Kyouko-san had no choice but to support my broken one. Once again, I leaned on her.

"Are we catching another bus? A tram?"

"No, it's faster on foot. She lives within walking distance from school..."

Given that there was a time limit, not having to spend much time on travel should have been very welcome, but walking meant that the sight of a giant being supported by a white-haired middle-school girl might draw unwelcome attention along the way.

Please, don’t look here, officers.

"...Kyouko-san, you're not going to go in that outfit, are you? You're going to change back into your original clothes somewhere, right?"

The forgetful detective supposedly never wore the same outfit twice, but this time should be an exception.

"My original clothes were burned by the middle school girls. In the incinerator."

Terrifying, middle school girls... It seemed like a school with history, but I didn't even consider they'd have an active incinerator.

It's amazing she survived.

Maybe I should have gone to help before the hour had passed.

"I understand well about what you lost... but Kyouko-san, did you gain anything? Find any information about the testament girl, I mean?"

"You betcha,"

Kyouko-san nodded, using some youth slang she had picked up.

I sincerely pray that this isn't the only thing she learned today.

Just what kind of adventures had the detective experienced in the prestigious girls' school remains a mystery to this day, and as a humble ally and intermediary, I too had no hope of breaching the confidentiality she so vehemently upholds.

"The testament girl seemed to be somewhat of an outcast in her class,"

Kyouko-san began to speak of her findings.

"Although her grades were among the top, it seems she had many troubles with interpersonal relationships—and, by the way, it appears she was not part of any club activities. After school she often read books in the library, and that's why the librarian remembered her quite well,"

The way she said "the librarian" seemed oddly specific—when I pointed that out,

"Yes. Among the testament girl's classmates, there were even those who couldn't quite remember her name,"

Kyouko-san added.

Somehow, when it's put like that, the connotation of the pseudonym

"testament girl" changes—it starts to feel like the anonymity is not due to privacy, but rather due to obscurity.

Sakasezaka Masaka, although a hard name to remember, should have been unforgettable if she were in your class, given the rare surname.

She stood out.

And if that was something that was vaguely remembered but still felt

like a hassle to fully recall, hence treated as "something unknown"—it would be just too poignant.

"Listening to this doesn't really lift the spirits. I didn't exactly have a happy time during my student days either..."

Even now, being either unemployed or thought of as a criminal, my twenties aren't exactly fulfilling, but at the very least, I was blessed with friends.

"That's true. But, you know, to die is to be forgotten,"

The detective in the sailor uniform said bluntly.

It was as if she was pushing the testament girl away, and while walking close to me, it also felt like she was pushing me away.

"It's natural for young girls with a future to want to distance themselves from a peer who took her own life, thinking 'it has nothing to do with us'—

after all, nobody wants to be involved,"

As someone who had actually gotten involved, I couldn't quite find the words.

Thinking that the testament girl's life was saved because I was walking there, I can't simply "distance myself" so easily—unlike the forgetful detective, I can't just cut things off or compartmentalize that easily.

"...So, the girls don't have any clue about the motive behind her suicide?"

After all, they hardly knew her—if so, it's impossible that they would know why she committed suicide.

Given that some may even suspect me as the criminal, influenced by the media—it's likely that the police have already thoroughly questioned them about these matters, and if that's the case, it might end up being true that Kyouko-san was merely played with by the middle school girls and came back,

"No,"

Sure enough, at that point, she spoke.

"Though no one could speak of a specific reason, on that matter, everyone unanimously said the same thing. 'I can understand wanting to die.

Because...'"

"? Because?"

"'Because,' well, various things after that. Like 'it's annoying,' 'it's bullshit,'

'I'm busy,' 'it's such a drag'—really, it's just like, you betcha."

Even when expressed in youth slang, the nuance doesn't come across —

was she even using that right?

I can understand the feeling of wanting to die.

Because.

It somehow feels decadent... it doesn't match the image of free-spirited middle school girls who play by dressing up a grown woman in a sailor uniform.

It's not just that it doesn't match—it's the complete opposite.

"A desire for suicide... is that what it is?"

"Hehe. It seems unnatural, you're about to say?"

Kyouko-san laughed for the first time since her return—how many emotional scars has she incurred in just one hour. If it weren't for the case, it might be better for her to just sleep now and forget everything—that's how it feels, although it's still less unnatural than Kyouko-san's sailor uniform appearance.

"But, weren't you the same during your junior high days? Bright and dark feelings coexisted normally, right?"

"Umm... well."

Though I can say it was a gloomy student life, on the other hand, I did enjoy reading books, so I can't deny that.

It was somewhat enjoyable and somewhat tough.

So, does that mean there was a "desire to die somewhat"?

"But if we start talking like that, it might lead to children committing suicide left and right..."

"Just because you're hungry, you don't eat everything you find around you, right? And you don't sleep just anywhere because you're sleepy, do you?

And Yakusuke-san, you wouldn't go out with just anyone because you want love, would you?", people have self-control, Kyouko-san reminds.

In terms of the three basic desires, I got it—I don't remember ever saying I wanted love, though.

If they seem to want it so badly, it's disturbing.

Maybe even a violation of human rights.

"It might be pointless to delve too deeply into an analogy... But humans can't go without eating forever, or without sleeping forever, right?"

Setting aside love for the moment.

"But you can live without committing suicide, can't you—or rather, if you commit suicide, you'd die, wouldn't you?"

"You would die, yes. However, there are things like hurting oneself, or tasting a bit of death, right?"

Self-harm or masochism, is that what it's about?

Or maybe—attempted suicide.

"I also have my memories reset every day—every day, it's like I'm dying."

"....."

That's not something I can share as an experience—it's impossible to empathize with that feeling.

It's even hard to imagine.

She calls herself the forgetful detective, but what kind of feeling is

that really—what she's thinking and feeling now will disappear without a trace in twenty-four hours.

People often say that there's no reset button in life—but Kyouko-san is forcibly reset every single day.

As I struggled to find words,

"Really, it's like being reborn over and over, so lucky. Every experience feels fresh."

Kyouko-san said casually in contrast—her schoolgirl sailor uniform added an uncanny innocence to her words

"No matter how many times I kiss, it's always the first kiss."

3

Pure and innocent girls might be as much a fantasy as the most idealistic of expressionists—I steer the conversation back on track from my end.

"So, does that mean the motive behind the testament girl's suicide was due to interpersonal relationships at school? If she felt out of place in class..."

"If being out of place in class led to suicide, kids would be offing themselves left and right."

Kyouko-san overlays my earlier statement with that—it's true.

Maybe I'm too eager to jump to easy answers because I'm starting to feel the time limit—soon, four o'clock in the afternoon will be in sight.

When the remaining time before the time limit starts to run out, a coward like me begins to panic—although Kyouko-san doesn't seem to show it, the fact that she is reluctant to spend time changing clothes suggests she might not have much leeway either.

She claims, "Getting new clothes would take too much time, you know"—

an uncharacteristic statement for the fastest detective, but well, choosing clothes is a matter of personal taste, not detective work.

I might not know much about it, but it seems Kyouko-san had a private life too.

"But your reaction just now, Yakusuke-san, could actually be a significant clue—it's kind of hitting the right spot."

"? What do you mean?"

I was feeling complex emotions, even if I was being praised for showcasing shallow insights… What was the right spot?

"That is—if the testament girl had jumped without leaving that particular note, it's highly likely that the public would have perceived her suicide in that way."

"....."

Hmm...

Well, that might be true, but what of it? What's the problem with being thought of in that way—

"Do you not understand? If by chance you, Yakusuke-san, were to commit suicide,"

How creepy.

She said it so triumphantly, what is she comparing this to.

"How would it be if people thought, 'Ah, this person committed suicide because he had no friends. Super lame, huh?'"

"Whoa, I wouldn't like to be thought of as super lame, but..."

It sounds a bit like a leading question, but I see, I understand what she's getting at.

But in reality, even if I am blessed with friends, it's a matter of quality, and if I were to jump, people might think I had worries in that area—

alternatively, I might have been tormented by guilt and ended my life to prove my innocence, or worse, they might decide I admitted my guilt and ended it all in a noble way.

Dead men tell no tales.

One cannot prevent being freely talked about with regards to the motive for suicide—if that is the case, it may sound strange to put it properly, but one would want to leave behind a note that states the true reason.

It is unclear how much meaning there is in protecting one's honor when one is going to die anyway, but then again, when it comes to suicide, there is hardly anything else left to protect.

"If even an adult like you thinks that way, then a sensitive teenage girl would feel it even more strongly, even more stubbornly—like committing suicide just because she was out of place at school, how lame."

"And, anyway, it's super lame, right?"

It couldn't be that frivolous.

But well, if that's not the real reason and one is saddled with such a "sin,"

it's unbearable.

At least I'm not troubled by having few friends.

"People would think you'd jumped from a building because you were out of place at school. Isn't that the worst?"

It is the worst.

Having one's suicide eloquently spoken about is indeed in bad taste, and Kyouko-san, who can come up with such thoughts so quickly, has quite a good nature, but, including myself, that's how the world is.

Despite wanting to understand, they seek simplicity—if a middle or high school student commits suicide, they think there must have been problems at school.

"Thinking that, they are mostly not wrong—but for the one being thought about, it's unbearable. If it's not true—or even if it is true—you don't want to be thought of that way. It's not nice to be told the truth."

When a detective, whose job is to uncover the truth, says such a line, it has quite a flavor.

Indeed, it's not pleasant to deceive and mislead, and the truth is not much more pleasant—uh, what does that mean?

"Meaning... the reason the girl who left the will jumped to her death was to show off, to look cool—is that what you're saying?"

"That's one interpretation. Wanting to die for a cool reason, a desire for an honorable death, is not such an incomprehensible feeling, is it? The aesthetic of embellishing one's moment of death is, after all, traditionally common in Japan."

"They say that Bushido is about finding death... But, well... Even if I understand that for a child, not having friends is an embarrassing thing, to say that they committed suicide because of the influence of manga, that's never... cool."

If the motive for writing lies in a will was to "look cool," then there might be another reason—no, but, I don't know.

What is a cool reason for suicide?

Is there such a thing?

"If the sole purpose was to divert attention from the true reason, there would be no need to select a cool reason. Rather, a stereotypical and believable reason would suffice—on the other hand, even if it's cool, if a twelve-year-old girl, who was a primary school student until last year, leaves a will saying, "I die to bring reform to this country," no one would take it seriously, right? They'd just think she's lying."

"That's true..."

Everyone would think that kind of will is a lie, even if I was the one to leave it.

"...I see, so that means, "being influenced by manga to commit suicide" is not hard to believe..."

It has that "fits too well" feeling that Kondou-san talks about—if Kondou-san, being an involved party, could feel this incongruity, otherwise, one might just conclude, "Ah, that's what it was," and dismiss it with a "that happens."

"That would mean... if it comes to that, Fumoto-sensei really just got caught up in it..."

Was it Pattern B, or β?

I've forgotten the specific classification.

In a way, he’s caught up in something worse than me.

A complete scapegoat.

"But, what could be the reason for the suicide of the testament girl that she wanted to hide so desperately—I wonder, Kyouko-san, from your intuition, isn't the reason of 'being out of place in class' not the direct cause of suicide?"

"It's different... I cannot say with certainty, but at least, that reason wouldn't convince Kondou-san or Fumoto-sensei. There's neither evidence nor basis."

I see.

On the flip side, if it were possible to convince Kondou-san and Fumoto-sensei, evidence and basis might not even be necessary.

However, we still can't see the character of the testament girl—can we really delve into such inner thoughts in just six more hours?

"Character... yes. Nobody mentioned her personality. Perhaps no one knew her well enough to—well, it's better than someone pretending to

know her, but the librarian had an interesting analysis."

And that's what Kyouko-san said.

Analysis?

Indeed, initially Kyouko-san mentioned that the librarian remembered the testament girl well...

But it's hard to imagine that the librarian had enough contact with a student to make an analysis... It sounds like something out of a drama for a girl who stands out in class to be friends only with the librarian, but that's exactly why it seems unrealistic.

Ah, no, that's wrong.

Since it's the library, direct contact might not even be necessary—it's a place for reading books and borrowing them.

It is said that one can guess what kind of person the owner is just by looking at their bookshelf.

The librarian, who could know what books the testament girl read alone in the library and what titles were recorded on her checkout card, might have been able to step much deeper into her inner life than her classmates.

Reading is such a private act—I've heard of avid readers who refuse to create a bookstore point card just because they don't want their book purchases to be databased.

Indeed, from that perspective, analyzing the testament girl might bring us closer to the motive for her suicide—

"No no, Yakusuke-san. That's not it."

"Eh?"

"Because, that's just the reverse of the prejudice that she might have been driven to suicide by the influence of books—while I fully agree that reading is a private thing, and that the spines of books lined up on a bookshelf can reveal the character of their owner, yes, that's an interesting way to view things, fun among friends, but, that's not much different from making a fuss over the titles on a criminal's bookshelf, is it?"

Hmm.

I have no words for that.

"The influence of books leads to crime," and "books that captivate criminals," though they seem opposite, in the end, might be saying the same thing—it's prejudice either way.

Saying this kind of bookshelf belongs to this kind of person is like saying, because you're born in October, or because you're type A—it's an argument that at its extreme, is only as good as a fortune-telling reference—it's circumstantial evidence, not incontrovertible proof.

You can't tell from a bookshelf how the person read the book, whether they found it interesting or boring, or even if they bought it but never read it...

But if so, what kind of analysis did the librarian do on the testament girl—

could it be that they were really friends, as adults and children are?

"No, they hardly ever spoke—but you see, it's not the titles of the books, nor the content, but the way she read them, the way she borrowed them, that as a librarian, could not be ignored for being so distinctive."

"...? But isn't that ultimately the same? The way she read, the way she borrowed, those are just a matter of personal freedom as long as they don't bother anyone—"

"The testament girl, she almost always balanced the books she read, the books she borrowed."

"Balanced? What do you mean by balanced?"

"When she borrowed a newly arrived book, she would also borrow an old book from the collection—when she read a historical novel, she would place a fantasy beside it. After a poetry collection, she would follow with a biography, after science fiction, a business book, when borrowing light

novels, she would also take pure literature, and after reading a detective novel, she would then read a romance."

"....."

The balance between detective novels and romance novels is questionable, but balance, is that what it means?

"Does that mean... she was a girl who read a wide range of books?"

"No, no matter how you think about it, it's not an amount she could finish reading by the return date. In other words, she wasn't actually reading all the books she borrowed, but was trying to give that impression to those around her—that's the librarian's analysis. She was faking it to avoid being judged by the books she reads. 'You can tell a person's personality by their bookshelf'—she had her own way of counteracting that prejudice.

Borrowing dummy books to read as decoys—the librarian had such an impression of the testament girl."

"It's like how impressionable boys and girls, when buying slightly

erotic books, will also put reference books on the counter"—Kyouko-san said in a cheerful tone, making a vulgar, or rather, an overly simplistic example.

It was an example that would be a lie to say I had no idea about, and I couldn't say that I couldn't understand the feeling of wanting to hide what kind of books one prefers.

A recommended book is not something you can easily tell someone about, and the prejudice of "someone who likes such books" can sometimes be more unpleasant than being accused of a crime because you like it.

When reading A, read the opposite of A.

When reading B, read the opposite of B.

It was probably not just a tendency limited to reading—it was convincing enough to be considered almost pathological, the first glimpse of the testament girl's unique personality.

At the very least, it was an episode that could be said to express the twelve-year-old girl much more accurately than the carbon-copied will.

After that day, having caught her falling body with my own—I felt like I finally met the testament girl face to face.

Being caught faking feels somehow more embarrassing... but I guess that's something a professional's eye can't be deceived by.

If it were me, I would simply think that she's a girl who reads various books—I'd be completely fooled.

"I see. I understand the librarian's analysis, but Kyouko-san. So, what does that mean?"

"Yes, Yakusuke-san. That means, the testament girl dislikes being analyzed and having her inner thoughts probed. She's a person who prefers to hide herself as much as possible—that's what we can infer."

As a detective trying to find the real reason for her suicide by ten o'clock tonight, that's not a very favorable personality trait.



4

Later on, Kyouko-san, supporting my right side, got us to the Sakasezaka household only to find no one there.

It wasn't just that there was no one home, it was more like no one lived there.

All doors and windows of the townhouse were closed tightly, even though it was only evening. If you looked at the amount of newspapers sticking out of the mailbox, anyone could deduce that no one had been back for a while, detective or not.

Should I assume that they're staying at a relative's house to escape the media's coverage...? At the time, that's all I thought, but then, when I went to the hospital where the testament girl was admitted, it seemed it wasn't just that.

Considering the testament girl was still in a coma, I had planned to speak with her family, who would be attending her, but that plan was shattered by the information Kyouko-san got from a nurse:

"The family hasn't visited even once. From the time of admission until today."

As she would probably have done with the librarian, Kyouko-san's skill (as a pro) in taking advantage of the fact that she was dressed in a sailor suit to pretend to be the girl's friend (i.e. a middle school girl), cleverly

obtaining testimony from the nurse was impressive, but it seemed that the testament girl's family environment was, to put it nicely, not a good one.

And considering that as a motive for suicide, for a twelve-year-old girl, must be an unbearable prejudice.

In any case, since the testament girl in a coma was not accepting visitors, the detective in a sailor uniform and the victim covered in wounds were unable to meet her.

The girl I felt I had met might still have not even shown her shadow.

Chapter 7:

Kakushidate Yakusuke Revisiting

1

"Yakusuke-san. Could you go and buy some clothes for me?"

Kyouko-san, who had twice experienced the disheartening event of being rained on, to both the girl's home and the hospital where she was admitted, stopped in her tracks for a moment, I would have guessed that she was savoring her canned black coffee bought from the hospital, but unexpectedly, she asked for this favor.

"This is a fairly large hospital. I think we can borrow a suitable walking cane for you—so, may I ask you to do that?"

"Uh, okay..."

Certainly, a hospital of this scale should have a cane suitable for me—but honestly, I didn't understand the request.

Clothes?

"I can't stay in a sailor uniform forever. I won't call it a stroke of luck amidst misfortune, but the continuous swings and misses have created some spare time. I'm thinking of taking the opportunity to change."

It had started to look like normal attire, but now that she mentioned it, she was right.

She couldn’t possibly meet Kondou-san in a sailor uniform at ten o'clock at night—Kyouko-san might forget by tomorrow, but I would be teased for the rest of my life.

At this stage, with less than four hours left until the time limit,

whether there's spare time or not is beside the point; it feels like we've hit a dead end with the investigation. So, changing clothes here might be a good idea for a change of pace.

But why should I be the one to buy them? Kyouko-san's "request" seems to imply she wants me to go alone... but it's her clothes, shouldn't she be the one to choose?

"Don't say that, please help me out. I don't mind your sense of style, just treat me as your doll."

What's with the pressure?

Dressing Kyouko-san, who is said to never wear the same clothes twice and is so fashionable, is too much of a burden for me... I can't do it with the innocence of a middle school girl playing dolls.

The best I can do is to be careful not to pick anything that clashes with my limited knowledge of fashion... It's definitely better for Kyouko-san to go buy it herself.

"No, in the meantime, I have something I want to do—call it a personal errand or a menial task. How about we meet on the rooftop of the mixed-use building where the testament girl jumped off, an hour from now?"

Another separate operation, then.

Was Kyouko-san going to buy something else? It's hard to ask more when she says it's a personal errand.

If Kyouko-san entrusts someone else with choosing her clothes, it suggests that what she plans to do in that hour isn't entirely personal... but more than that, I didn't understand why we were meeting on the roof of the mixed-use building.

We should have finished inspecting the site in the morning, right?

I don't really feel like going back to the same place again on the same day, not even to visit the secondhand bookstore I recently quit from...

"No, no, they say visit the scene a hundred times. When you're at an impasse, returning to the scene is an ironclad rule of investigation."

Kyouko-san, who now sounded more like a detective than a police officer, apparently had a reason for wanting to revisit the building that was once my workplace,

"I've been concerned about something. I was hoping to find some testimony related to it somewhere."

She explained her reason for wanting to revisit.

"The question that has always been there is, why did the testament girl jump off that building?"

"...? Well, isn't that what we've been discussing all along? We're investigating the true reason why she jumped—"

"Not that. Why she'd jumped from that exact building—"

Feels like she'd just rearranged the words.

But hadn't we already debated that once?

There were other buildings around, but they were all five or six stories high, and the only building that was tall enough to ensure death was the relevant building.

I remember having such a conversation at the scene.

'Not that. It is indeed the tallest building in the area—but there must be taller buildings in other areas, right? If you jumped off a building higher than ten stories, whether there are pedestrians below or not, even if there is a trampoline below, you should be able to die regardless. In which sense, a seven-story building is kind of in between."

"....."

That's relatively speaking, I suppose.

"Moving on from there, while I was sneaking into the school, I naturally took a stroll inside to gather some information. It wasn't ten stories high, but since it's a school facility, the ceilings of each floor are quite high, and the building had enough height. It was tall enough to die if you jumped off."

I had thought the testament girl had chosen a building that was tall enough to ensure her death, but looked at in a broader perspective... it was in between.

Having heard that much, I understood what she wanted to say□the same thing that had flashed in my mind before. Why didn't she jump off within the "school"... Of course, it's nothing more than a worn-out template to say that middle schoolers must jump only from the rooftop of the school building they attend.

You're free to jump off from wherever you want.

Suicide is suicide, no matter where you jump from.

But, when I'm confronted with the question again—it is strange why she didn't choose the nearby school building or a ten-story building, but that particular mixed-use building as the place to take her life.

Otherwise, I wouldn't have ended up with fractures in two places like

this, so it's not someone else's problem...

"If there's a reason the testament girl jumped from that building... it's possible that it is nearly equal to the reason for her suicide. So, I was sure that as I continued my investigation, the reason why she chose that building would come to light, but alas, it did not touch upon it at all."

"So I'm thinking of going back to the site", said Kyouko-san□well, I have no objection to that. If we talk to the people involved with the building, we might find out something.

"If there had been a story about a famous person who had jumped off that building in the past and she was influenced by that person, that would be a strong hypothesis. So, Yakusuke-san, if it's okay with you, could you please go talk to the owner of the secondhand bookstore where you used to work before we meet up?"

That's too much to ask as an additional request.

It's the pinnacle of shame for a former employee to show his face there.

"The shop closes in the evening, so I think the owner has already gone home... I don't know his home phone number either."

"Is that so. That's quite an early closing time. It's characteristic of an old-fashioned bookstore□well, if that's the case, then that's that."

Kyouko-san shrugged her

shoulders without

showing

much

disappointment and said, "Then please take extra care with the

clothes."

That request alone was heavy enough, but I figured that if I resisted too much, there might be additional requests, so I decided to accept.

Well, that being said, it's a rare opportunity.

It's not often you get the chance of Kyouko-san letting you choose any clothes you like for her to wear□huh?

"Er, Kyouko-san?"

"What is it?"

Having decided on a course of action, Kyouko-san seemed ready to leave the hospital lobby immediately. In a hurry, I stopped her and pointed out a problem that I had just noticed at the very last moment.

"I don't mind buying clothes for you...but, um, I haven't received the money for the purchase yet."

"What?"

Looking incredulous, Kyouko-san said,

"I have to pay for my own clothes?"

2

Setting aside my own taste in fashion, when purchasing clothes for Kyouko-san, what I must be careful to do is to choose long sleeves—

it's desirable to select items, whether they be pants or skirts, with a length that extends to the ankles.

Because she is a detective who occasionally uses her own skin as a last resort notepad, fashion serves not only to be stylish, but also acts as a cover sheet to hide those notes—well, with such criteria in mind, shopping shouldn't take too much time.

There wasn't a particular request for such, so sleeveless tops or culottes might be refreshing, but it would be unfortunate to have one's taste questioned because of them—even if one is considered boring, it's best to just quickly buy whatever catches the eye without thinking too deeply.

That's why the errand I was asked to run didn't take much time, but because I was thinking about such things while shopping, I couldn't help but remember the text that was written on Kyouko-san's right thigh.

"If it wasn't suicide?"

...Although I thought it quite critical and a viewpoint that could overthrow the whole outline of the incident's investigation, Kyouko-san had not shown any signs of putting forward this possibility.

It might have been a hypothesis not yet ready to be disclosed in front of people like Kondou-san, Fumoto-sensei, or Torimura-san, in the meeting room of the publishing company, but reaching this stage and still not mentioning it to me, her companion, feels unnatural.

Maybe she had considered that possibility during the day, but as the investigation proceeded, that hypothesis was abandoned... Well, the idea that a twelve-year-old girl was murdered on purpose was too absurd and unlikely.

I resolved to try and ask Kyouko-san about this point in a roundabout way when we meet up... Of course, I'll hide the fact that I saw the

writing on her inner thigh and pretend as if I came up with the hypothesis myself; I'll have to display that much acting skill.

And then, I realized something else.

I had been unwittingly asked to do the shopping and took a different action on my own, but the rooftop of a mixed-use building as a meeting place was a very bad idea.

In the morning, if I had let her go up there alone, she might have climbed over the fence and followed the testament girl to her death—there's no guarantee she isn't doing the same thing right now.

While that might be one of the elements of the fastest detective, she can be reckless or thoughtless about consequences, especially when it comes to detective work. Anyway, often risking danger.

I don't want to imagine arriving only to witness Kyouko-san falling, but I cannot say that such a development is impossible—so, hoping at least to be able to slide to the point of her fall, I rushed to the mixed-use building with the crutches I had borrowed from the hospital, as if they were part of my own body.

3

In conclusion, my worries were for naught—I wasn't able to get to the meeting point before the fastest detective, Kyouko-san, but it seemed she had just arrived, and in the now completely dark rooftop of the mixed-use building, she was at the stage of taking off her boots, which she put on again.

"Ah. Yakusuke-san, thank you."

Seeing the package in my hand, Kyouko-san happily ran over—maybe she wanted to change out of her sailor uniform as soon as possible.

As far as tracing the actions of the testament girl goes, it's not as if it's much more imposing than taking off her boots.

"No, I'm looking forward to seeing your sense of style. I wonder what you've chosen for me to wear."

"I'm afraid I'll disappoint you...please don't put anymore pressure on me.

Instead, Kyouko-san, how did things go?"

"Eh? What things?"

"You know, personal business or small things, you said."

"Right, that..."

Then, Kyouko-san revealed a vague or perhaps complex smile. It's a deep expression for a middle school girl to have.

"The craftsmanship is not smooth, I cannot say. It was almost a complete miss. It was meaningless."

"Is there such a thing as striking out on personal business?"

"The personal business was a lie. Actually, I went to investigate alone."

Kyouko-san said, without a hint of remorse—well, I had thought it might be something like that.

Somehow, I find myself accompanying her, but I am neither an employee of the Okitegami Detective Agency nor am I playing the role of Watson.

There must be places she doesn't want me to follow her to, networks of information she doesn't want me to know about—I was trying to come to terms with the difficult distance between myself and Kyouko-san when she casually revealed,

"Actually, I had gone back to the Sakasezaka house."

What...? Before revisiting this mixed-use building, Kyouko-san had also revisited the testament girl's home?

Indeed, considering the possibility that someone might return home at night, that revisit might not have been in vain... But then, couldn't she

have informed me of that beforehand? Since it was a place we had already visited together.

"Well, I thought you might be getting tired of being involved in this case by now—"

"Involved...?"

Yes, I am tired of it.

From the beginning, it's been nothing but getting dragged into trouble —

but I wouldn't consider a revisit to the testament girl's home as such a trouble, even if we had to divide roles to acquire a change of clothes—

"But if I had told you earlier, you would have become an accomplice."

"Accomplice?"

"I kind of sneaked in while no one was home."

What do you mean, kind of sneaked in.

It's blatantly illegal—that's something I can't say.

Never mind how she entered the tightly shuttered house remains a mystery, but it's no wonder she wanted to act undercover.

It's different from storming into a girls' school, after all... From Kyouko-san's perspective, having someone of my large stature accompany her would certainly have increased the difficulty of illegal entry.

Having me go buy clothes was not so much for a personal reason, such as not being able to endure the sailor uniform, but rather to ensure that I didn't witness the illegal investigation... It wasn't a matter of distance, but of guilt.

Well, the forgetful detective will probably forget any sense of guilt by tomorrow anyway, not even the slightest bit of residual guilt remaining...

"I wanted to see what kind of house the testament girl lived in, what kind of room she spent her time in. Even if I couldn't speak with her family, I at least wanted to see her bookshelf."

Wait, that's different from what she said.

Surely, on the way to visit that very home, Kyouko-san and I had agreed that it is not right to judge a person's character by the contents of their bookshelf...

"It's important to have both perspectives."

Kyouko-san said this without any concern—though I wonder about such a sudden change, well, maybe she is right.

That, too, is a matter of balance.

The ability to affirm and deny at the same time might not be essential for detective work, but it's certainly handy.

Anyway, there's no point in blaming her for that.

It's better to overlook her illegal activities than to witness her falling from the rooftop of the building... Really, she is a dangerously unreliable detective from all angles.

"So... after taking such a bold step, there must have been some result, right?"

Bold step, or rather a misstep... If a report had been made, there would have been an incident involving an adult woman dressed in a sailor uniform sneaking into an unoccupied house, and taking such a risk must be matched by an equivalent reward, otherwise, it wouldn't be worth it.

But that seemed to be a rather selfish assertion because,

"Unfortunately, like previously, it was a swing and a miss. The testament girl's room didn't have a bookshelf—it seems she was the type to throw books away."

As Kyouko-san shrugged her shoulders without showing much disappointment.

Like previously, she said.

Crime truly doesn't pay… should better stick to proper investigations.

If anything, "throwing away books" also means not leaving a reading history in one's room, so it could be possible to further reinforce the character of the girl who doesn't want her inner thoughts probed, from that fact.

But honestly, that information is no longer necessary...

"We're at a loss, aren't we? I went around the building before going up to the rooftop, but I didn't find anything particularly noteworthy. It's a dead end... Now we've really run out of things to do. What should we do?"

Saying this, Kyouko-san looked up at the sky that had darkened before we knew it.

The current time is 7 o'clock at night—there are still three hours left until the deadline, but it's ironic that we've run out of to-dos. With three hours, one would expect an action-packed time from Kyouko-san, the fastest detective—

"I was also waiting for the rain, but with only three hours left, is there little hope?"

Still looking up at the sky, Kyouko-san muttered.

She wasn't feeling sentimental looking at the starry sky; it seemed she was just checking the condition of the clouds—rain? Ah, yes, it had rained on the day of the incident. The weather on that day was probably not discussed in the reports, but there's a weather column in the newspaper—

Kyouko-san must have read it.

You could say she's sharp... or rather, she doesn't miss a beat.

If it's about recreation, maybe she wanted to be thorough to that extent—

even I don't have a detective who can control the weather on my cell phone, though.

"Yes, of course, I know it's a stretch... But it does bother me. Why did the testament girl choose a rainy day?"

"? ...Maybe it just happened to rain on the day she decided to die—"

"Is that so? Because I climbed over that fence myself, I know it would be very dangerous to slip in the rain."

It's something you could understand without having to climb over the fence.

When you're about to die, you wouldn't think you'd worry about poor footing, especially since you're about to jump, but then again, if you think about it, it does become a concern.

Slipping and falling is entirely different from jumping off by yourself —

there's no information about a raincoat or umbrella being left at the scene, so somehow the scene of "a girl getting completely wet choosing her own death in the rain" felt natural, but could that also be an assumption based on dramaturgy?

The reason she chose this mixed-use building—and the reason she chose a rainy day.

It was a sudden rain, and it seemed like a detail that could be dismissed as

"just because."

"Yes. Indeed, even in the work 'Cicerone,' there's a character who 'never opens an umbrella,' and suicides in the rain are depicted—if it was just a reenactment, I wanted to confirm that. But, waiting for the rain was a miss."

So said Kyouko-san.

"Now that it's come to this, instead of searching for the motive behind the testament girl's suicide, it might be better to focus on how to persuade Fumoto-sensei—"

Seeing Kyouko-san shift her thoughts to such a practical direction, it seems we're really at a dead end—it's frustrating, but it can't be helped.

Kyouko-san is not a superhuman, nor an omnipotent detective.

What can't be done, can't be done.

But that doesn't mean I should now call another detective from my phone contacts... Hmm.

That's right, the memo.

"What if it wasn't suicide?" The memo that was written on Kyouko-san's right leg—that we haven't touched on at all since Kyouko-san declared a dead end.

That means, after all, that was a hypothesis that had occurred to her, but upon consideration, had already been dismissed—but it's strange that a

notation that the forgetful detective bothered to write on her skin hasn't come up even once in conversation.

Anyway, I would know if I asked.

Kyouko-san was pondering the possibility of a murder case and then how she dismissed it—

"Hey, Kyouko-san. I just had a thought, but is there no chance that the testament girl didn't jump off herself, but was pushed by someone? That is to say, instead of suicide, could it be a murder case—"

"Huh?"

As I spoke, Kyouko-san frowned, not as much as when she was being unfairly charged for her clothing, but with a considerably suspicious look on her face.

Huh?

"No way, that's not possible, Yakusuke-san. A murder disguised as a suicide, haven't you just read too many detective novels?"

Not the kind of line you'd expect from a detective.

"I see, it's an interesting idea, though. But that's if there's evidence. Oh dear Yakusuke-san, you could become a mystery writer."

It's a line that would befit the revelation of the culprit... no, I would like to become a mystery writer if I could, but, wait, something's wrong.

Kyouko-san is not getting on board at all.

"Yakusuke-san. To be serious, I think the police have properly investigated that area—if it were a more elaborate method of suicide, maybe, but jumping off is quite a primitive, or should I say, simple method, so I don't think there's much room for tampering. If someone other than the testament girl was on this rooftop, there would be traces left behind—

not to mention if there were signs of a struggle."

"...Uh, um."

I got flustered.

Well, that's probably the case, realistically.

If she was pushed off, the testament girl wouldn't have gone without resisting... and it would have caused a big commotion right away, so if there was a perpetrator, they wouldn't have been able to escape from the building.

"But, then, what about the note you had written on the inside of your right thigh, Kyouko-san—ah."

Don't give me 'ah.'

I was nearly dizzy with the fragility of my own acting ability—even though I hadn't done anything wrong, nothing was going right. I didn't have time to think about what was wrong with my life and,

"....."

Kyouko-san sprang into action in an instant.

Without a word, she briskly flipped up her jet-black sailor uniform, the pleated skirt, and exposed her right thigh up to the root—her pure white thigh was now laid bare.

But, there were no words in sight.

Of course there weren't, those were the words I barely saw when she was climbing over the railing in quite an awkward position.

"Yakusuke-san. Like a knight bowing to a princess, could you please crouch down there?"

It was an extremely direct way of asking for a favor, but at that moment, I was not in a position to refuse—I obediently hunched my large frame and squatted down.

I wondered what she was planning, but then,

"Excuse me,"

Kyouko-san casually lifted her exposed right leg and placed it near the Achilles' tendon on top of my left shoulder.

Moving like a ballerina.

Even though I'm squatting, it's my body, so my shoulders are at a decent height... but the flexibility of her hip joint seems to be on par with a ballerina's.

In terms of impropriety, it was far more inappropriate than climbing over the fence, but with her skirt firmly held down so as not to show her underwear while flipping the skirt up to the root of her leg, it could be said that she was maintaining just enough dignity.

It was an action too peculiar to understand whether it was a display of anger or something else, but nevertheless, by holding her right leg up high like that in a Y-shaped balance, Kyouko-san's inner thigh was exposed to the outside world—I had begun to think it was my mistake since Kyouko-san's reaction was so dull, but contrary to my doubts, there it was, written in Kyouko-san's own handwriting, "What if it wasn't suicide?"

It wasn't that I had said something outlandish, I was greatly relieved, but as for Kyouko-san, it seemed she was incredibly surprised about something that was both on her own skin and written by her own

hand, going "Eh? Eh?"

She seemed flustered as she asked, as if she had absolutely no recollection of why such a note was written on her leg.

"What is this? Did you write this, Yakusuke-san?"

"Don't say such absurd things."

Even if we set aside the matter of the handwriting, it would be impossible to write on such a spot without Kyouko-san noticing.

"Then, who on earth could have..."

"Who on earth... you wrote it, didn't you, Kyouko-san? You know, you do this sort of thing when it's necessary, taking notes on your own body..."

It was something I had only recently become aware of, but for Kyouko-san, who lived with the constant instability of not knowing when she might lose her memories, it was not so much a secret as it was an inevitable action for her as a forgetful detective.

"But I haven't written anything like this. I've never once thought that the testament girl's suicide might actually be a murder."

"You didn’t...?"

I had assumed that during the time we were taking separate actions in this building during the day, Kyouko-san had borrowed a pen and written it...

But had she forgotten writing it?

No, at least since she had met with me in the hospital room, Kyouko-

san's memories had been consistent. There had been a precarious moment on the train, but she had never fallen asleep.

She hadn't forgotten the content she had prepared or the investigations she had conducted. It's impossible to think that she fell asleep while we were separated.

Then, what does this mean?

As I was helplessly confused by this development, which I was experiencing for the first time despite having requested the forgetful detective's services numerous times,

"Ah,"

Kyouko-san, with the admirable deductive skills of a detective, seemed to have reached the truth of the matter—no.

To the forgetful detective, such an oversight would have been unlikely.

"Could this be from an old case...?"

4

I didn't know what case Kyouko-san had solved yesterday. However, judging from the fact that she seemed to be somewhat sleep-deprived, contrary to her own words, I could guess that she must have faced a considerably difficult case.

As night deepens, the risk of accidentally falling asleep and losing memories increases—unlike this case, it's likely there was a situation where she had to take notes on her skin.

Whether or not those notes were useful, once the case was resolved, they would naturally be washed off in the bathroom. However, depending on where the note was written, there's an off chance that a note could carry over to the next day.

"What if it wasn't suicide?"

...It's only natural that she was perplexed.

This note was left by yesterday's Kyouko-san to solve yesterday's case —

hence, of course, it has absolutely nothing to do with the testament girl, let alone the entire case of today...

"The oversight of a lifetime... how embarrassing."

Saying this, Kyouko-san held her white-haired head in one hand.

As a forgetful detective who strictly adheres to confidentiality, leaving a note from another case until the next day must be something unthinkable for her—of course, even when leaving reminders, caution is taken, so just by reading the brief phrase "What if it wasn't suicide?", there's no way to deduce the details of yesterday's case. However, for Kyouko-san, who avoids taking taxis and using travel cards, it's not about that problem.

"It's no surprise something written in such a hard-to-see place got missed,"

I offered what was a less than consoling comment.

Thinking that the spot hard for the person themselves to see was now, quite literally, right in front of my eyes, I felt strangely unsettled.

"Ah, this is so embarrassing,"

Kyouko-san said, seemingly truly embarrassed, reverting to her natural manner—though I think it's about time she felt more embarrassed about the pose she's holding, with one leg raised so high.

There had been no harm done, despite the oversight...

"That's true. It was good it was you who saw it, Yakusuke-san."

At such a heart-skipping remark (of course, she must mean it was good that it wasn't a direct client who saw it, considering the office's reputation), Kyouko-san removed the hand she had placed on her head and,

"Yakusuke-san, can you wipe this off for me?"

she asked, somehow producing a pack of alcohol disinfectant wipes from somewhere within her jet-black sailor uniform.

"Please, I need you to cover this up."

"Yes, of course,"

I replied, as her tone, though polite, left no room for argument—I had to accept. It's understandable, since it's a spot she can't easily reach herself, and any clumsy attempt might result in her skirt fluttering and revealing what's underneath.

Even if she doesn't carry a pen for writing on skin, the fact that she carries tools to erase such writing is a prudent measure worthy of a forgetful detective... As I thought this, I took out a disinfectant wipe from the pack she handed me.

Come to think of it, how many times have I erased notes written on

Kyouko-san's skin? Even if it's been many times, for Kyouko-san, it's as if it's the first time every time.

"Oh, I'm really so embarrassed... Please, Yakusuke-san, don't tell anyone that you wiped my inner thigh."

There was no need for her to ask; it was something I couldn't mention to anyone.

The way I feel embarrassed is different—Kyouko-san is in a sailor suit with one leg raised high, and I, bowing before her with broken arms and legs, we must look like a truly perplexing, twisted scene. It's best to finish quickly and move on.

"*Sigh*... When I change into the clothes you bought for me, I need to check if there are any other spots I missed."

"That's true..."

I agreed, but couldn't help feeling disappointed by the realization that the possibility of the testament girl's death not being a suicide was just my own hasty misunderstanding, just a mistake.

I had mistaken a mere graffiti at the crime scene for an important clue and had been trying to decipher it—it's clear I'm not cut out for detective work.

If that's the case, the deadlock situation is definitive, and the remaining time should be spent thinking of ways to persuade Fumoto-sensei—

considering that Kyouko-san has enraged the artist, it didn't seem possible to have a calm discussion. In a way, it's Kyouko-san's own doing, but really, you never know what might cause trouble...

"Ah!"

Just as I was about to wipe the writing from a delicate area that was difficult for her to reach herself, Kyouko-san let out such an exclamation—panicked, I quickly,

"I'm sorry, so sorry,"

Apologized profusely and let go.

Had I applied too much pressure?

Since I could only use one hand, and that a left one, it was indeed difficult to gauge the force—yet Kyouko-san said,

"Don't apologize. Rather, you should be proud."

She said something incomprehensible.

Looking at her, that expression which should have been ashamed of her own mistake was now beaming radiantly.

"Thank you so much, Yakusuke-san!"

She said, smiling brightly as she thanked me.

With one leg raised, it now seemed as if she were dancing a line dance by herself—what happened? What kind of change of heart is this?

"Um... Kyouko-san?"

"What if it wasn't a suicide"—that's it, that's it! I hadn't even considered such a possibility—but!"

Kyouko-san, in her unreserved high spirits, shouted—"What if it wasn't a suicide"?

That message, whatever it was, had to do with yesterday's incident and had nothing to do with today's incident, right?

It was my misunderstanding that thought there was a connection, and true to form, Kyouko-san had never considered such a possibility—never considered it?

I hadn't even thought of it—that's right.

That means she never verified and dismissed it—now, for the first time, she did the verification.

"Kyouko-san—so?"

"Yes. That's right, Yakusuke-san. The testament girl's suicide, it wasn't a suicide—not yet, I still need to think it through, but most likely, this line of thought is correct."

The forgetful detective spoke with conviction.

It was as if she had completely forgotten that she had just dismissed that line of thought a moment ago—it was a complete change of attitude. The depression she had earlier about the mistake she made by forgetting to erase something seemed completely gone. It was typical of Kyouko-san to be so pragmatic, and for my part, I was happier to see her lively and spirited.

It's somewhat embarrassing that my simple misunderstanding contributed to solving the case, but from here on out, it was a race against time.

Time to refine the deduction... Kyouko-san had to verify the seemingly valid idea she had more thoroughly.

Especially if it wasn't a suicide.

If it was a case of murder, the whole direction of the investigation would change completely—it would be like starting the investigation all over again.

This would certainly not be enough time...

"The time limit is ten o'clock tonight. Considering the travel time to Sakusousha we have about two and a half hours left. Phew... this is troublesome, isn't it?"

Said Kyouko-san.

Right... even for the fastest detective, it seemed the only option now would be to humbly request an extension of the deadline. Considering the trouble

with yesterday's incident, Kyouko-san probably couldn't afford to stay up late tonight...

However, what Kyouko-san meant by "this is troublesome" wasn't that.

"This is troublesome... what should we do with the leftover time?"

"Eh?"

"I'll just do some lowdown, hush-hush stuff, shall I?"

As she spoke cheerfully, Kyouko-san gently released her hand from her skirt and then touched my right arm, on the fractured area.

"Could you check if there are any other notes left, Yakusuke-san?"

Chapter 8:

Kakushidate Yakusuke Questioning

1

And at ten o'clock at night, Kyouko-san and I were once again seated at the conference room table of the Sakusousha company—however, the difference from the time of the interim report was that the manga artist, Mr. Shun Fumoto, and his direct editor, Mr. Torimura, were not present.

During the day, I fretted over whether he was that angry with Kyouko-san for criticizing his work, but it seems that it was not because of that (though that might be part of it), but rather because the work he had started on afterwards was behind schedule.

It's unbefitting of a manga artist to break a deadline, but on the flip side, one could say that he is so engrossed in his manuscript that for the magazine editor-in-chief, Kondou-san, who wants to retract his retirement announcement, his absence is probably an unexpected blessing—thus, the audience for the resolution chapter of the Forgetful Detective turned out to be just the two of us, Kondou-san and me.

Kind of a letdown for a gathering for the reveal scene—in detective novels, there is always the criticism that the culprit, who might be pointed out for their misdeeds, would not just answer the call and sit in on the solution, but well, in today's busy society, it seems that before that, the very act of

"gathering everyone" is difficult.

"Huh? Okitegami-san, did you change your clothes?"

Kondou-san said, sounding surprised.

The outfit that made him point it out to Kyouko-san was a tight-fitting polka dot shirt with a long knit cardigan, a long high-waisted sheer

skirt, and black stockings—it's either my fashion sense or rather, nonsense.

The color of the stockings was clearly influenced by the sailor uniform, and as for the shirt, it wasn't tight because of fashion, but simply because it was the wrong size.

But perhaps thinking it was better than a sailor uniform, Kyouko-san didn't complain, and instead said, "It's lovely," and became a dress-up doll—she certainly wears it well.

"Yes, I changed,"

Kyouko-san said with a conspicuous choice of words.

She didn't say she had done it twice, though..

Watching Kyouko-san in her sailor uniform, I couldn't help but wonder what kind of comment the gentleman Kondou-san would have made... I really want to know what the correct answer was.

"Please rest assured, I have properly finished the deduction□it's surely something that will meet your expectations,"

"That's good to hear."

Of course, Kondou-san wouldn't have thought that the Forgetful Detective had neglected her duties to indulge in fashion, but there was an evident sense of relief when Kyouko-san endorsed it so confidently.

After all, he is the editor-in-chief. While carrying out other work, he was also dealing with this matter—his anxiety must be considerable, and if he is informed that a resolution is in sight, he would naturally heave a sigh of relief.

I am very grateful, but as an intermediary, I still couldn't completely dispel a certain unease—because, to avoid double work, once again I was present in this conference room without having been told anything.

Needless to say, I have been saved from desperate situations by Kyouko-san on numerous occasions, and I am not one to doubt the deductive abilities of the Forgetful Detective, but this time, my totally off-the-mark misunderstanding has become the foundation, and her deduction is complete.

In fact, since gaining some insight on that rooftop, she has not done any additional investigation□essentially, Kyouko-san's detective work had ended there.

That's why I am very afraid□although we skipped lunch, it was nice to have time to slowly eat dinner, but it's not just scary, I felt guilty. It's strange how Kyouko-san can be so composed.

"Well then, I apologize for rushing you, but could you please tell us, Kyouko-san? What was the real reason the testament girl committed

suicide? If it wasn't because of Fumoto-sensei's work, then perhaps, as a result of your investigation, was it because of "Cicerone" after all?"

With a tone that conveyed his readiness to accept the answer, Kondou-san leaned forward and said□Kyouko-san, with a clear face, replied,

"Well, well. Please calm down,"

and took a sip of the drink that was offered.

Certainly, it may be because it is a strong black coffee that she asked for, that Kyouko-san is trying in her own way to clear her mind before she approaches the resolution phase.

Not an attempted suicide, but an attempted murder.

One could say that this adds an element of criminality, or that it becomes a more serious matter.

Even if that is the truth, the question remains... whether such a theory can be presented in a convincing manner to Kondou-san (and me)... It was also a moment to showcase the detective's skill.

"Kondou-san. You seem preoccupied with the reasons for the suicide, but what do you think, have you ever considered this possibility□what if the girl's fall wasn't a suicide?"

First of all, the Forgetful Detective boldly puts forward the "what if" that not even she herself had considered.

And then the mystery solving begins.

The girl who dislikes analysis is finally deciphered.

2

"W-What if it wasn't a suicide... you mean?" Kondou-san asked.

"Yes. I have been considering that possibility from an early stage," I said.

I wish she would stop speaking in such a suspenseful manner□it makes me anxious.

She's putting too much faith in how tight-lipped I am.

Well, if you interpret it forcefully, you could say that she had that idea even before she took on the request yesterday... but no one can know what Kyouko-san thought yesterday anymore.

"There was a suicide note, and her shoes were lined up. And then the girl fell□it's true, if you pick out just these things, it would appear to be nothing other than a suicide by jumping. However, that is not necessarily the only conclusion."

"Are you saying... you're suggesting this is a murder case, Okitegami-san?"

Kondou-san is genuinely surprised.

He must be shocked by Kyouko-san's idea (although it was a misunderstanding), but it seems he was quite taken aback by the surprising possibility.

"Yes. That's exactly what I thought initially."

How confidently she lies.

Perhaps she's enjoying watching my nervous state from the sidelines.

"As expected of the fastest detective," Kondou-san said.

It seems Kyouko-san's reputation has risen a notch in Kondou-san's eyes, but as a mediator, I feel terribly uncomfortable because it was built on a lie.

"However, with all due respect, Okitegami-san. In the matter of whether it was suicide or murder, hadn't the police conducted a thorough investigation at the initial stages of the case? The detectives who came to me also seemed to think there was no possibility other than suicide..."

That was something Kyouko-san herself had stated.

I hadn't thought that far and had simply taken the message left on Kyouko-san's leg at face value, but it seems Kondou-san immediately had his doubts.

At this rate, he might even expose Kyouko-san's pretense, which makes me tremble on the inside.

"Or are you saying, Okitegami-san, that there was a cunning criminal behind this case, one who could even deceive the police's scientific investigation?"

"Cunning... yes, if you want to call it cunning."

Kyouko-san, who had been confident until now, nodded somewhat hesitantly.

"However, if you call it superficial, then it is superficial. At least, I cannot praise their behavior highly."

"? Well, I certainly have no intention of praising a murderer... or rather, an attempted murderer, an attempted murder suspect..."

Kondou-san said, looking puzzled.

"Cunning" is not a term of praise to begin with□but when you get to "superficial," it clearly sounds derogatory.

Of course, merely attempting to kill a twelve-year-old child is enough to warrant disdain, but even if the other party is the criminal, such an expression doesn't seem like Kyouko-san.

Kyouko-san said,

"The fact that it turned out this way has a lot to do with chance, and it can't be said that things went according to the perpetrator's plans□in fact, the plan for the crime completely failed."

Well, of course, even though the testament girl fell from the building, she didn't die... so it's certain that things didn't go as the perpetrator had

intended. However, that makes me suddenly very curious as to what would have been a "success" for the perpetrator.

It was also probably an unexpected event that I happened to pass by the point where the testament girl fell... So what would have had to happen for things to have gone according to the perpetrator's plans?

And, after all□who is the perpetrator?

Is it someone I know?

Someone I've met during the investigation?

Up until now, in this conference room, I've been consistently just listening, but finally unable to contain myself,

"Please tell me, Kyouko-san,"

I broke the silence and asked.

"Who exactly tried to kill the testament girl?"

"It would be more accurate to ask, 'Who exactly did the testament girl try to kill?'"

Kyouko-san answered.

"Because she is the perpetrator."

3

I'm confused—what does that mean?

The testament girl is the perpetrator?

Then, in the end, does that mean it was suicide?

Just a matter of phrasing—but no, that's not it.

Who exactly did she try to kill?

"So, so then, Okitegami-san—the testament girl, you're saying she tried to kill Yakusuke on purpose? Not by chance, but she targeted and fell on top of him?"

Kondou-san, picking up on Kyouko-san's insinuation, arrived at the answer even before I did.

He was very distraught and loud, uncharacteristic of him, but of course, I was more surprised—not by the loud voice, though.

Targeted? Me?

It wasn't suicide, but a murder—that's what it was.

Does it mean not that the testament girl was pushed, but that she jumped down in an attempt to kill me?

There had been baseless theories circulating in the media that I was at the fall point trying to kill the girl... but in actuality, was it the opposite?

"No. The one who was targeted was not you, Mr. Kakushidate."

In the midst of our shock, Kyouko-san remained calm□calling me "Mr.

Kakushidate" instead of "Mr. Yakusuke" probably because we were in front of Kondou-san.

"That was the failure and the element of chance. Simply put, it was a case of mistaken identity."

"…..?"

Mistaken identity?

It would be awful to be killed in a case of mistaken identity... But what about the suicide note? The intent of the testament girl is not clear at all...

nor the reason why she chose that mixed-use building as the place to jump from.

"The reason that mixed-use building was chosen as the place to jump and not anywhere else is because it was Mr. Yakusuke's workplace," said Kyouko-san.

Hmm... Ah, if I were the target, would that be the reason? The testament girl wasn't looking for a place to die—so it had to be the seven-story mixed-use building, not a five-story or six-story building, nor a ten-story

building or a school building. It wasn't about the height; it was that particular building.

To target me coming out of the building□but earlier, she said it was a case of mistaken identity...

"First of all, trying to kill someone by body-slamming them from the rooftop of a building is too crude a method. And indeed, because of that, she is now on the verge of death□"

Kondou-san, who seemed to have calmed down, said this, and to this, Kyouko-san replied,

"It's not crude. It's complicated, though."

"Isn't it easier to think that there was a murderer with the intent to dive, targeting the pedestrian who entered the fall point, rather than a suicidal person who happened to fall where there was a pedestrian?"

While walking down the street, there's always an inescapable possibility that a meteorite will hit you on the head□there might even be the chance of a turtle falling from above.

But the probability of such coincidences is less than the success rate of a human purposely falling to target another human, because the latter can be aimed.

Police forensic investigations would be meaningless if that were the case.

What happened was□what the testament girl did was no different from a jump from the rooftop.

The act was the same, only the internal intentions differed.

No one else was on the rooftop, nor was there a struggle—moreover, at the scene, there was the note and even her neatly arranged shoes.

Did she prepare those herself...?

No, but that's hard to believe. It's not convincing.

Such a body-slam, with no guarantee of one's own survival□rather, the odds of dying are much higher. Even if there was a murderous intent, it almost seems like a double suicide.

"There's so much I want to ask... no, there's too much I need to ask, I don't know where to start with the questions..."

Kondou-san carefully mulls over his many questions as he turns to Kyouko-san.

"Okitegami-san. Could you first explain what you mean by mistaken identity? If it wasn't Yakusuke she was trying to kill, then who was the testament girl after?"

In this situation, the fact that Kondou-san is asking about me first really shows his character... And even setting aside the fact that it's about me, it's a question I also want to know the answer to.

Anyway, how could someone mistake a man of my large stature for someone else?□But that doesn't mean I have any clue about a twelve-year-old girl wanting to take my life.

It would be horrifying to think I was just a random target like "anyone would do", but it didn't seem to be the case□then what?

"Height is not an issue in this case—because from the rooftop, that is, from a vertical viewpoint, it does not serve as a marker."

Ah, I see. We had that conversation too.

At that time, it was about whether it could serve as a cushion for the

fall...

"Height does not serve as a marker□then, what do you think does serve as a marker? It's hard to imagine planning a body slam, but say for example, if I were walking down the street and someone tried to hit me by dropping something from the rooftop, what would they use as a marker?"

"□Well, that is"

It is not so common to view humans from directly above□and with a distance equivalent to seven floors, wouldn't it be impossible to identify individuals?

So, was the testament girl's target really "anyone"? No, but if we speak specifically of Kyouko-san□

"Yes. You would use this white hair as a landmark. Because you're looking from above, that's the only criterion you have."

"……But, wouldn't that be an unreliable standard?"

Kyouko-san's full head of white hair is noticeable due to her youth, and it would serve as a landmark, but if you include pedestrians in their fifties and sixties, white-haired individuals are not so rare.

"Yes. If we only used white hair as a criterion, we could easily mistake someone else□like the day Mr. Kakushidate borrowed an umbrella and was mistaken for the owner of the bookstore "Truth Hall"."

The reason for choosing a mixed-use building. And the reason for choosing a rainy day.

Unlike Kyouko-san, I don't have a distinctive hairstyle□therefore, from a high altitude where you can't distinguish height, it is difficult to identify an individual like Kakushidate Yakusuke. If it's raining and I was carrying a "borrowed" umbrella, Kyouko-san reasoned paradoxically that the testament girl wasn't after me, which is understandable and clear.

I had mentioned that the day was rainy, so it was natural for her to assume I had an umbrella, but why did Kyouko-san know that the umbrella was

"borrowed" and that the lender was the owner of "Truth Hall"?

"Eh? But, Mr. Kakushidate, didn't you say so? When you retired from the bookstore, you promised the owner to return things like aprons and umbrellas... So, if it suddenly started raining on your way home and you had an umbrella, I thought perhaps it was borrowed from the owner□was I wrong?"

Not□wrong.

Because the rain was sudden that day, I didn't have an umbrella□so I borrowed one from the store owner to go home. Kyouko-san had skillfully scooped up a testimony I wasn't even aware of from the edges of my words□I'm surprised she listened so closely to such a mundane departure story of mine.

My head was less visible under the umbrella I held overhead, and I did not notice the girl falling from above□yet, that very umbrella became the target marker for me. The indifferent store owner, who said he would go home after the rain stopped, bluntly lent me the umbrella□it was the shop's umbrella, usually used by the owner, with the shop's name on it.

As someone who hadn't had the best work experiences, I was grateful

and pleased by such consideration... but never imagined it would cause a bone fracture.

"The umbrella acted as a cushion, so it could be said that both the testament girl and Mr. Kakushidate were saved, right?"

That might be true—of course, not only my bones but also the ribs of the umbrella were broken, but it was a good umbrella, so I intended to have it repaired and returned—but really, is that true?

I still find it hard to believe.

No matter how low the probability, it still seems more plausible to think that I was just unfortunately involved in a suicide jump—after all, why would the girl try to kill the bookstore owner?

"I don't know. It can be speculated that there was some kind of trouble between the store owner and the testament girl, but unless we hear the story from both or at least one of them—however, in this case, isn't the motive irrelevant?"

"Irrelevant?"

"The content of the commission I received from Kondou-san is the truth behind the testament girl's attempted suicide—the true motive behind the twelve-year-old girl's suicide attempt. But if it turns out to be an attempted murder, that means the suicide never happened, so there's no need to investigate further, right? Fumoto-sensei's one-shot story "Cicerone,"

which beautifully depicted suicide, would be proven to be completely unrelated."

"....."

Well, that—might be so.

"Cicerone" is a story of suicide, not of murder.

Therefore, it is clear that it was not influenced□probably it was just a case of a "name being exploited." Not to "hide the true motive" but as a disguise to "hide the murder."

But that would be too unsatisfying an end. Even if that's the truth, it's hard to imagine that Fumoto-sensei would accept it.

Kyouko-san, who seemed to understand such circumstances, said,

"We can make our own analysis of why the testament girl chose this method."

"And with that," she added.

"If there are any requests, I can explain what exactly happened, what I think was behind the incident. I mean, what the testament girl wanted to do, what she intended to do—and what kind of failure she made."

"Please do tell us."

Our voices, Kondou-san's and mine, came out in sync.

It would be too cruel to leave things as they are after coming this far.

"Then, I'll make it brief,"

Kyouko-san began.

"Suppose a girl harbored a strong murderous intent towards someone. A very strong murderous intent—I repeat, for the specifics of this intent, one would have to ask the person herself. If we establish that and inquire around, we might see some plausible, likely motives."

It doesn't seem as straightforward as she makes it sound.

However, unlike suicide, which is a personal act that concludes with the individual, murder spreads to the surroundings, and perhaps the difficulty of tracing its origins is significantly reduced.

Moreover, some might think that searching for the motive is meaningless—I don't particularly like this way of thinking, but among the detectives I rely on, there is a famous detective who insists, "I'm fine as long as I can solve an intriguing mystery. I'm not interested in the perpetrator's motive." He may seem inhuman, and in fact, he may be very

cold, but then again, if solving an "intriguing mystery" is enough to wear a knowing expression and start a long-winded sermon to the criminal, would a detective who does that be more humane? Probably not.

People can commit suicide for any reason, and likewise, it's not strange for people to attempt or even succeed in killing for any reason —alright, let's swallow that point for now.

The testament girl attempted to kill the shopkeeper.

With a childlike intense murderous intent.

So, what I want Kyouko-san to tell us here is not the reason she tried to kill—but why she chose such a roundabout method to do it.

Roundabout, or rather, dangerous.

"It's not a trick for the sake of a trick, but... Maybe she just did it because she thought of it? An impulsive execution of a delusion she harbored, as if driven by the sudden rain that fell at a calculated timing just before closing time..."

I hesitantly asked Kyouko-san.

This is like the kind of loving criticism found in a superior detective novel,

"To kill just one person, you wouldn't go through all this trouble,"

"Wouldn't it be less likely to be exposed if you just attacked on a night road and buried the body in the mountains?"

The reason for creating a locked room was because the criminal was a mystery maniac.

It sounds far-fetched, yet it's filled with a sense of reality—considering the range of the testament girl's readings, it seems she also read detective novels.

No, not the range—the balance.

"Indeed, if it hadn’t rained, maybe she wouldn't have done it, but just as there is no rain that doesn’t stop, the rain will fall eventually—what Mr.

Kakushidate is saying is, using an umbrella as a sign, to kill someone with a body attack from the rooftop is too risky, right? It's not certain to hit, and even if it does, it's hard to say it'll definitely kill—however, at the very least, it's certain that she would sustain severe injuries, and in the worst-case scenario, she would be the only one to lose her life."

That is correct.

Or rather, that worst-case scenario was almost made true.

If it doesn't get worse.

Based on an uncertain sign, she dove into the wrong person, and although she did hit, the only one left in a critical, unconscious state was herself—

the targeted shopkeeper probably didn't even realize that he was nearly killed.

It's a tragic outcome, and probably seems foolish too.

Even for someone like me who was just an innocent bystander, I don't think I would have done it.

Rather than that—not that it would have been better, but—if she had carried a fruit knife and targeted the shopkeeper from behind, not from above, after work, her goal would have been easily accomplished.

"But then, while you might indeed be able to kill, wouldn't you get caught?"

"Getting caught... you mean being caught by the police?"

"No, what I mean is that people would know she tried to kill someone."

"?"

I wonder how that's different.

Of course, there's no criminal who prefers being caught by the police, but normally, it's considered better than dying. Then again, until this very moment, I hadn't considered the possibility that the testament girl had intentionally tried to kill not just the shop owner but even me, who had been mistakenly targeted.

"Because she chose an unimaginable method that was literally throwing her life away—"

Kondou-san said, as if to convince himself, trying to come to terms

with it.

"So far, her murderous intent hasn't been revealed... That means, her cover-up went according to plan, right?"

"To be precise, if it had gone as planned and the testament girl had fallen towards the shop owner, her motives and plans would probably have been exposed to the public a long time ago. It's because Mr. Kakushidate, a complete third party, mistakenly became a victim that it seemed more accidental. Because no connection was found with a 'passerby who just happened to be there,' it's easier to be understood as an unfortunate accident."

Kyouko-san didn't say it in so many words, but the disposition of being incriminated of the 'passerby who just happened to be there'—that is, me—benefited the girl. Because suspicion fell on me, no one could discern the girl's murderous intent.

Even the forgetful detective didn't.

If it weren't for the unforgivable carelessness of "yesterday's Kyouko-san"

forgetting to erase her notes, the possibility that "What it wasn't a suicide?" wouldn't have even been considered.

Because I, the "collateral victim," had no idea, neither murderous intent nor premeditation could be read.

In that sense, the girl was saved by chance, but that's not lucky at all; it's a mistake in itself.

Since the goal for which she risked her life was not achieved—

"However, according to what Okitegami-san says, the testament girl

wanted to hide the fact that she had murderous intent more than being caught by the police, right? She tried to make it look like an accident..."

Kondou-san's point could be said to be quite perceptive.

Because she's currently unconscious, no one would say that, and it's hard to say in this atmosphere, but if she recovers, she'll have to face the responsibility of involving others in her attempted suicide.

Even if she won't be criminally charged at twelve years old, the fact that she involved a third party in her suicide attempt will follow her for life—

the moral responsibility and social sanctions.

...I see.

She didn't try to hide the act, but the murderous intent—so.

"The girl apparently hated being analyzed pathologically," said Kyouko-san.

This information was obtained even after experiencing the humiliation of being toyed with by middle school girls—the girl was one who would camouflage even when reading a book.

"She hates people talking about her behind her back—so she hides what she likes, and she even deliberately deals with what she dislikes. She's said to be a balanced person. Actually, it might have been true—she didn't want to be thought of as trying to kill, so she faked a suicide. She didn't

want her true motives to be probed, so she wrote a suicide note—a fake one,"

Kyouko-san said, though it goes without saying, the motives written in

the note are camouflage.

Yes.

Fumoto-sensei, like me, was caught up in the girl's murderous intent—no, while I was an accidental victim of miscalculation, Fumoto-sensei was a calculated collateral victim because he was a celebrity.

"...That means, by misusing the work's name... for the testament girl,

'Cicerone' was not a favorite work of hers," Kondou-san confirms with Kyouko-san, as if struggling with how to report this to Fumoto-sensei.

Kyouko-san seemed to think it was unnecessary to elaborate further and simply nodded in silence—it was a form of emphasizing that Fumoto-sensei was irrelevant, but it wasn't a matter for pure rejoicing.

Being used as camouflage means being nearly thrown away—regardless of whether it's good or bad, no author or editor can feel good about their work being treated that way.

The impact of his own work leading to a child's suicide is, in a completely different sense, an extremely shocking event, enough to not be surprised if the mangaka were to retire.

A work becomes the reader's once it is published, and regardless of how it is evaluated, one must accept it. If one's spirit is broken by that, they

should never have begun creating in the first place□that is a wonderful aspiration, but not a rule that should be imposed.

"Isn't it okay? I don't think Fumoto-sensei will retire. With the vitality to get angry like that when I disparaged him, I don't think he can retire," she said.

"...Is that so? Well, even if that's not actually the case,"

Kondou-san, looking somewhat dubious, expressed the editor's view to Kyouko-san's comment, which seemed somewhat irresponsible.

"The idea that one's own work might kill a reader, if they've harbored it even once□I think it's inevitable that it will affect his future style. He might become inhibited□he might self-censor without the need for external regulation. He might shrink back and end up drawing nothing but bland, textbook manga that isn't good for anything. If that happens, as a mangaka, it's as if he's retired, isn't it?"

"Because now that he’s thought that his own work might kill a reader, that's precisely why□Fumoto-sensei won't be able to step away from creative work. Having virtually experienced the 'excitement' that his work can influence the life of a reader, there's no way he can retire."

That too□is a preconception about the author.

But it was a preconception with a sense of reality.

Fumoto-sensei had become a mangaka because it was interesting, and said he would retire when it was no longer so□but if you blew away ethics and

morality and thought about it, this experience must have been interesting for him.

The dangerous delusion that his work has an absolute power that could even take lives is a nightmare, but then again, it might also be a dream□the dream that stories can both give life and take it away.

Without that dream.

No one would read or create stories.

"...Well, I won't let that happen. Neither retirement nor inhibition,"

Kondou-san said, and it wasn't clear how much he sympathized with Kyouko-san's opinion, but that too must have been a declaration of determination.

"Thanks to Detective Okitegami, it looks like we'll just make the deadline.

The names for next week's chapter should be up by tonight," Kondou-san said.

At that time, I will tell Fumoto-sensei the truth of the matter□and to Kondou-san's words, Kyouko-san nodded,

"That's good to hear,"

and then said, as if switching gears, "Excuse me, Kondou-san. Now that the resolution phase is mostly over, may I make a rather bold request?"

? Usually, Kyouko-san would move on to talk about payment at this point□a bold request?

"Of course, I don't mind. If there's anything I can do, please feel free to ask."

He wouldn't usually speak this way to the Forgetful Detective, but Kondou-san, who had once again been helped by Kyouko-san, naturally took on the request.

"The names you mentioned, those are the names for next week's chapter of 'Very Well,' right? Yes, as I said during the day, I've read up to the latest chapter as a prelude to the case... I'm curious about the continuation, so may I read those names before I leave?"

Wanting to see the unfinished names is indeed a brazen request□but it was a testament to the power of Fumoto-sensei's manuscript, which, even unfinished, made Kyouko-san want to read it, even though it was

for neither work nor will she remember it by tomorrow.

That was the fourth certain fact in this case.

"...I said by tonight, but it's creative work, so I don't know what time it will be finished."

"I don't mind. Even the fastest detective sometimes waits."

"Then, I'll see what I can do."

To the excessively unreasonable request, Kondou-san smiled as if he had been very much saved.

Chapter 9:

Kakushidate Yakusuke Writing

Some days later, when I went to return the apron and umbrella to the used bookstore that specialized in mystery novels, the "Truth Hall" antique bookstore where I used to work, I was able to hear a story from the shop owner. From that, I could catch a glimpse into the approximate reason why the testament girl had jumped to her death. At the very least, it peeked through.

No.

Since the suicide note was fabricated, she should no longer be referred to as the testament girl—she should properly be called by her name as a middle school girl, Sakasezaka Masaka.

Now that the work of the Forgetful Detective is complete, and happily, Fumoto-sensei's retirement announcement has been retracted (of course, there was some fuss after that), it may not be something to bring up anymore, but still, to leave the incident I was involved with as "motive unknown" and to leave it vague is against my principles.

Not principles, but opinion—though it may just be an opinion, or perhaps just a sentiment, it's not right to simply put everything down to "darkness of the mind" just because it's a juvenile incident with high degree of anonymity.

Shining light into the darkness is the job of adults.

Though, it may lack persuasive power coming from me, currently unemployed.

That is a story from before I started working at "Truth Hall," but Sakasezaka Masaka had been frequenting that store since she was in elementary school—she was what you would call a regular customer.

Because of the owner's personality, it seems there wasn't any communication even with regular customers—but the owner knew from the start that the girl who had jumped from the building was a customer of the store.

Among the information that Kyouko-san, who had broken into the Sakasezaka family home, had gathered, there was the fact that there were no bookshelves in Sakasezaka Masaka's room. At the time, we judged that she must be someone who "throws books away," but besides throwing them away, there are other ways to dispose of books.

Giving them to someone—or selling to a secondhand bookstore.

The enemy of publishers, as Kondou-san might grimace, but for elementary and middle school students, using a used bookstore is a lifeline—Sakasezaka Masaka kept reading books without the need for a bookshelf, by selling books to buy new ones.

Makes you wonder what kind of life that is.

Just as the owner didn't talk at all to the media about me, he also kept his mouth shut about knowing her as a customer—that said, even considering his stubborn media dislike as a business owner, one could say that there was considerably more consideration for personal information than in today's corporations.

However, in the case of Sakasezaka Masaka, that consideration backfired—no, even so, the consideration was still insufficient.

It was around the time just before I was hired.

Whether it was just a whim for the owner, the same clumsy kindness he showed when he lent me the umbrella, or if there was something about the girl's demeanor that day that bothered him, for the first time he spoke to that small regular customer upon her visit,

"Hey,"

He called out to her, it seems.

"A book you would like has come in."

...So said, Sakasezaka Masaka turned pale and, as if fleeing, dashed out of the store.

At the time, it seemed the owner did not understand why, and even afterwards, he could not truly comprehend why she had fled—simply assuming she was a shy child who was uncomfortable being spoken to by store staff, and he convinced himself of that.

But, having spent almost an entire day investigating Sakasezaka Masaka with the master detective, I quickly understood the reason.

The realization of what kind of books she liked was unbearably embarrassing for the twelve-year-old girl—she pathologically hated, to

the point of illness, the idea of others knowing what kind of person she was, what she thought, and what she liked.

Sakasezaka Masaka was a girl who pathologically feared being analyzed.

Therefore, even when purchasing or selling at the secondhand bookstore, she must have naturally used camouflage, but the owner's eyes couldn't be deceived—what kind of books she preferred was blatantly obvious.

Like the librarian who had discerned that she disliked being analyzed, in front of a professional, such camouflage seems to be nothing more than a child's naive cunning.

But if one considers it as a child's naive cunning, there should have

also been consideration for a child's sensibility—of course, there may be many customers who prefer such "usual" interactions, but there are also many who are the opposite.

For Sakasezaka Masaka, having her heart seen was far more humiliating than having her naked body seen.

Enough to want to die.

Enough to want to kill.

Kyouko-san said that there was no environment that could scatter such childish murderous intent—no family member, classmate, or homeroom teacher could stop her. It's not that there was a need to confront and talk directly, just a bit of kindness like playing a game together might have been enough to end the whole story, I think.

That's why—she jumped.

Embarrassed to death, so to speak, so she faked a suicide because it would be embarrassing to be thought to have killed herself out of embarrassment.

But having no friends, having family issues, and being thought to have committed suicide because of that was also embarrassing, so she fabricated a suicide note.

To be thought to have committed suicide under the influence of a manga, however, might probably only feel embarrassing for an adult who has lost their childhood mind, and besides, as Kyouko-san said, it probably wouldn't have mattered so much if people took the made-up camouflage for granted.

Rather, it might have felt comfortably deceitful.

For someone like me, the idea that it is more pleasing to be misunderstood and humiliating to be understood seems to have

broken down, but I can sympathize somewhat with the feelings of a teenager who wants to cherish the identity of 'not being understood'.

But that's precisely what she detested.

On the flip side, the interpretation could be made that being an outcast at school or having certain problems at home could have been sufficient reasons for her to consider suicide—moreover, if one were to say more.

Perhaps the murderous intent to kill the shopkeeper by jumping off was the fake, and she was just looking for an excuse to satisfy the suicidal urges she always had.

No matter the reason, people kill others, and people kill themselves.

If that's the case, it's quite ironic.

The title of the work by Fumoto-sensei, which was clearly written in the suicide note, is excluded from the possible reasons why the sensitive young girl jumped off, simply because it was written in the note.

The reason she ended up tackling me instead of the shopkeeper might have been partly due to the landmark umbrella, but also because she didn't know that I had been hired at that shop after the day she ran away—

ultimately, because I was the one who was more conspicuously featured, Sakasezaka Masaka's suicide note never came to light.

Looking at it this way, one could say that not a single part of Sakasezaka Masaka's plan went well, as she had described it—filled with nothing but failures, it's almost presumptuous to call it a plan.

If one were to say that her motive was the delicate embarrassment of not even being of age for adolescence, it might sound somewhat cute,

but that's a bit off the mark.

I think it's different.

Because if you imagine a scenario where her plan had gone off without a hitch, it's chilling—the shopkeeper, having only offered a kind word,

would have been killed without understanding why, and the career of a manga artist would have been cut short.

...The suicide might have also been a "success."

It's not something that can be forgiven.

It's not something that can be settled with an apology, and even in death, it doesn't atone for anything.

A twelve-year-old girl would not receive criminal punishment, and Kyouko-san's resolution and interpretation would not be made public —

this case would indeed be buried in darkness, but to let it end up buried is just too devoid of salvation.

That's why I desperately want Sakasezaka Masaka, who still can't leave the intensive care unit, to regain consciousness. I want her attempt at death to fail. And someday, whether she likes it or not, I want her to read this memorandum I wrote about the case, to feel so embarrassed that she feels like her face is on fire.

I won't allow her to die a quick death.

I want the girl to live on, enduring the shame of life.

Speaking of which, according to what was conveyed by Kondou-san,

Fumoto-sensei had said such when deciding to continue his career:

"If I caused an incident, I might trouble my favorite manga—it's with this kind of thought, even if just for a moment, that I intend to write works from now on that could be a reason for someone to stop themselves."

It's different from Kyouko-san's opinion, and it's difficult to call such a declaration of determination a happy end, but even so, it's a professional's words—of course, as an amateur, I don't have such resolve, and I certainly don't presume that my writing will have a good influence on her. It's embarrassing to have my poor writing read, but in a sense, she and I shared a brush with life and death—we both should feel embarrassed.

The way to prevent jumping off isn't to build a fence on the rooftop.

It's to drive home that it hurts to fall.

Addendum

Personal news, but the fractures in my right arm and right leg healed exactly two months after the resolution of the case—I'll need some rehabilitation for a while since my muscles have weakened a bit, but at least now, I can finally resume my job hunting.

As I was disposing of the removed cast, I noticed something written in small letters on the back of the thigh cast that I had been wearing.

"Congratulations on your full recovery♡"

It was Kyouko-san's handwriting—next to the heart mark, as if as a signature, there was even a cute illustration of what seemed to be a

detective with glasses. For some reason, comical cat ears were added as a part.

This message, written where I couldn't see from my perspective, seemed less like an expression of familiarity and more like appropriate harassment with its heart mark and illustration.

When on earth...?

Had I lived all this time, for two months, without noticing, with a payback message like a time bomb... I don't remember doing anything that warranted retaliation, but thinking about it, I couldn't help but wryly smile.

Graffiti on a cast is like something out of a middle school girl's antics.

While fondly remembering Kyouko-san, who had passionately talked about how fractures were something to be longed for, it occurred to me,

"What if it wasn't suicide?" The message that had been written on the inner thigh of the forgetful detective—what kind of case was it really about, what was the message related to? Now, I was curious about that all over again.

Not just the content of the message, but the location of it—having written it down like this made me realize for the first time that a position hard to see for oneself is naturally also a position hard to write on oneself... And that's why Kyouko-san, uncharacteristically, must have failed to erase it, so under what kind of circumstances did she end up writing that message on the inner thigh?

Of course, protected by the ultimate confidentiality, I have no way of knowing about "yesterday's case" of the forgetful detective—no.

There wasn't supposed to be any way, but just after this, through an unexpected and surprising coincidence, I came to know about the

incident that Kyouko-san was involved in on the day before this job.

It was a peculiar crime called the Sinful Mansion Murder Case.

Afterword

There is a psychological test that asks, "If the world were to end tomorrow, what kind of restaurant would you want to have your last meal at?" While one might think of delicious, rare, or memorable meals, it's difficult to narrow down an answer. However, upon further reflection, I wonder,

"Would chefs actually be working if they knew the world was ending tomorrow?" This leads to the realization that we would have to source and prepare everything ourselves, but it's highly questionable whether we could obtain decent ingredients or cooking tools when the world is about to end. The end of the world, or society for that matter, doesn't just abruptly come to a close; there are processes, stages, and progressions leading up to it. The "day the world ends" might as well be synonymous with "today, when the world is nearly over." It raises the question of how different something that is ending is from something that has ended.

Before even discussing such grand themes as the Earth or the world, one might start to wonder how certain the dividing line between "being alive"

and "being dead" really is. Phrases like "living a death-like existence" and

"living on in everyone's hearts" aren't necessarily far-fetched metaphors.

Being encouraged with the idea that "if you were about to die, you would live more earnestly," upon deeper consideration, feels like being condemned with "if you're not living earnestly, you might as well be dead." But perhaps thinking "I'm already dead" can help one to let go of various things, lose lingering attachments, and come to a resolution.

In that vein, this is the fourth installment of the Forgetful Detective series.

Kakushidate Yakusuke, the return. He's had some tough experiences as soon as he's back, but let's say it's evened out (is it, though?). Reflecting back, it's been exactly one year since the first book in the series, "The Memorandum of Okitegami Kyouko," was published, and the author is

astonished at the speediness of this fastest detective, seemingly forgetting to take a break. Moreover, the fifth installment is already announced for publication in two months... Kyouko-san, could you not work faster than you type? In that sense, it was "The Testament of Okitegami Kyouko."

The cover features Kyouko-san in a sailor uniform. And as those who have finished reading the main story know, this sailor uniform is that of a middle school student. It's a motif that might normally be cause for concern, but VOFAN has beautifully illustrated it. Thank you very much.

I would also like to express my gratitude to the Kodansha Literature Third Publishing Department for keeping pace with Kyouko-san's speed, and I think I will begin writing "The Resignation Letter of Okitegami Kyouko."

Nisio Isin

Translation:

conmal

waifutime

Source:

掟上今日子の遺言書

西尾維新

First publication date. October 6, 2015